

**NEW**

EXCLUSIVE QUALITY

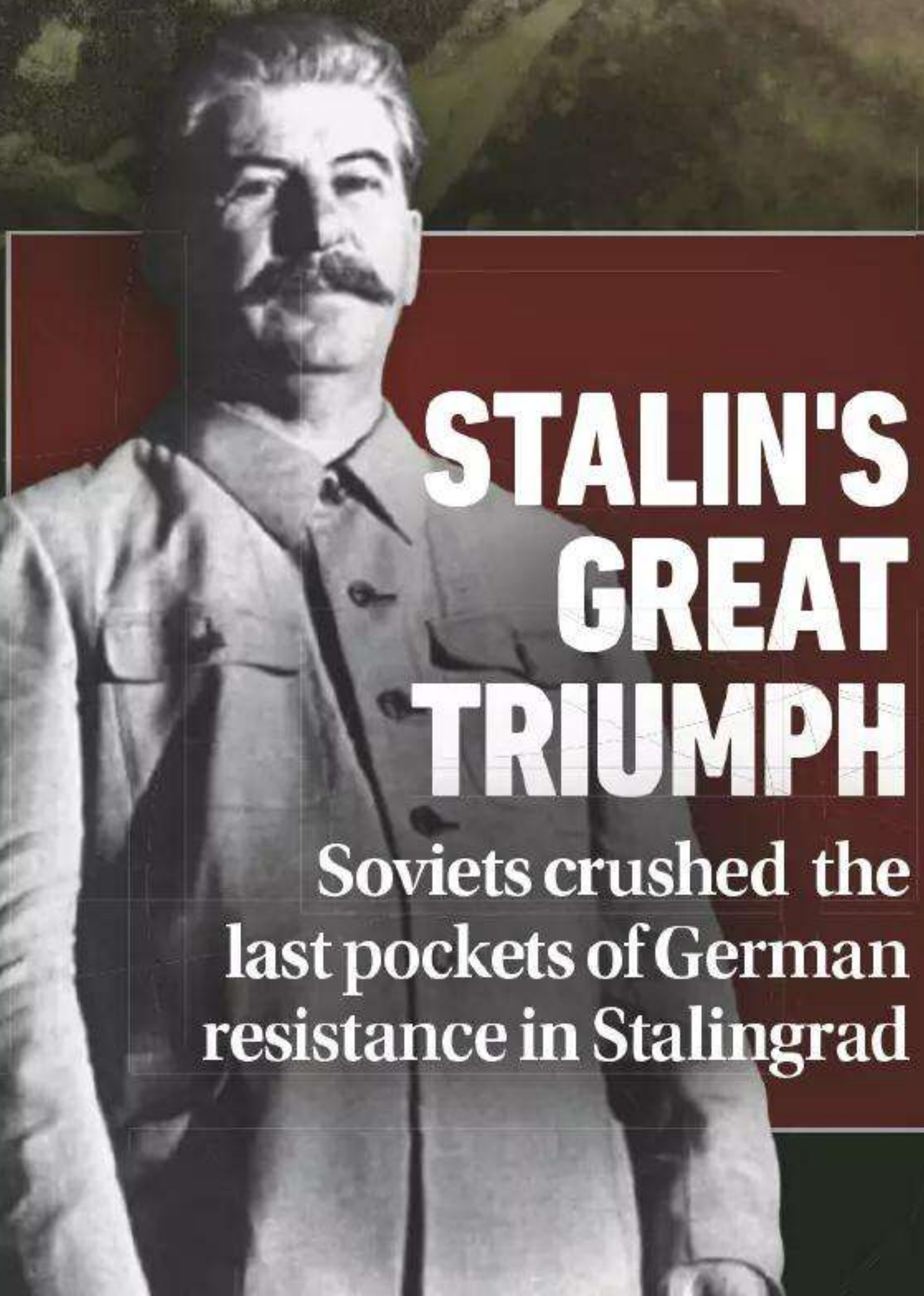
Bringing  
**History** to Life

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

# SLAUGHTER ON THE EASTERN FRONT



- 3.7 millions German soldiers stormed into the Soviet Union
- Fighter pilots spread death
- Jewish revolt in Warsaw was brutally crushed
- Hitler ordered Breslau to be kept at all costs



## STALIN'S GREAT TRIUMPH

Soviets crushed the last pockets of German resistance in Stalingrad

## THE FINAL BLOW

The Red Army stormed towards Berlin



## BATTLE AT KURSK

Hundreds of tanks clashed in history's largest-ever armoured battle

£12.99











## »» The war's longest front

It is 03.14 on 22nd June 1941. Along a 1,800-kilometre front line that stretches from the Baltic Sea in the north to Romania in the south, German soldiers are ready for battle. A minute later, all hell breaks loose. The Luftwaffe begins attacking targets behind the Red Army's front line, and the artillery opens fire. Germany's dreaded Panzer tanks follow – the spearhead of Operation

Barbarossa, Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. With 3.7 million soldiers, it's the largest invasion to date. The first few weeks seem to confirm the supremacy of Germany's blitzkrieg tactics as city after city falls. But at Stalingrad and Leningrad the German army is pushed back, and soon The Red Army storms forward in an offensive that has Berlin as its final target.





## The Nazi army is stopped



Hitler was desperate to occupy Stalingrad at any cost. But the Red Army proved impossible to crack, and the city became Germany's Waterloo. Read about the war's turning points on page 88

# 1939-45





## CONTENTS

- 6 German troops invade Poland**  
Hitler played a high-stakes game by invading his neighbour.
- 16 Hitler triumphs over Red Army**  
3.7 million German soldiers stormed into the Soviet Union.
- 30 Soviet dictator turns a blind eye**  
Why didn't Stalin listen to warnings about a German invasion?
- 40 German ring of steel chokes Leningrad**  
Hitler demanded the city's inhabitants be starved to death.
- 50 The blitzkrieg freezes**  
War on the Eastern Front halted a few kilometres from Moscow.
- 58 Fighter pilots spread death in the east**  
Luftwaffe aces shot down Soviet planes in their thousands.
- 68 Captured by the Germans**  
Prison camps were hell for Soviet 'subhumans'.
- 76 Attack on Stalingrad**  
The Red Army pushed back the Germans in fierce street battles.
- 88 Hitler's army lost it all at Stalingrad**  
The Red Army crushed the last pockets of German resistance.
- 98 Jewish revolt was crushed**  
SS butchered the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto.
- 108 History's biggest-ever tank battle**  
The Wehrmacht met fierce Soviet resistance when it attempted to go on the offensive at Kursk.
- 120 Stalin forced German retreat from Kiev**  
The Nazis continued to lose important territory as the Red Army pushed them back to the Dnieper river.
- 130 Stalin liberated Leningrad**  
The Red Army pushed Hitler's soldiers 100 kilometres west.
- 138 Germans sent packing by Red Army blitzkrieg**  
The Soviets surrounded and annihilated Army Group Centre.
- 148 The Red Army strikes a decisive blow**  
Soviet soldiers stormed towards Berlin.
- 158 Firebombing leaves Dresden in ruins**  
Bombers destroyed the German city in a single night.
- 168 Doomed city defies Stalin**  
Hitler ordered Breslau to be kept at all cost.



*German soldiers torch  
buildings during the invasion  
of Poland to intimidate the  
population into surrendering.*

# 1939

1<sup>ST</sup> SEPTEMBER





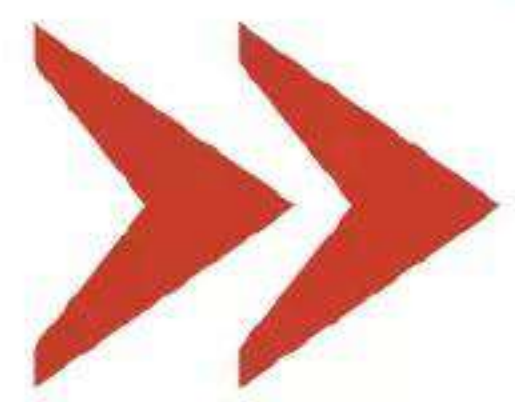
• • INVASION OF POLAND • •

# GERMAN TROOPS INVADE POLAND

Adolf Hitler takes a huge gamble when he decides to attack Poland. The country must be defeated quickly to prevent Western European powers – principally Britain and France – from interfering. But the campaign does not go entirely according to the Führer's plan.



## THE STAGE IS SET



Hitler aims to clear Eastern Europe for resettlement by Aryan Germans as part of his Lebensraum policy. He has taken Austria and Czechoslovakia without a fight; next up is Poland. But while its army is antiquated, Poland has guarantees of support from France and Britain. Regardless, Hitler decides to take a chance...



**A**T DAWN ON 1ST SEPTEMBER 1939, the German battleship SMS *Schleswig-Holstein* turned its giant guns towards Westerplatte peninsula on the Polish Baltic coast near the port city of Danzig (now Gdansk). At 04.48, the guns opened up and eight shells thundered towards the south-east corner of the city's garrison, creating three large holes in its outside wall and setting its oil storage dumps ablaze.

A few minutes later, three elite divisions of German marines attacked, but the garrison's small force – numbering around 200 Polish troops – put up a stubborn resistance. At 06.22, the marines radioed the battleship to report that they were retreating following heavy losses. Two-and-a-half hours later, the marines attacked again, this time reinforced with 60 soldiers from SS-Heimwehr. They forced their way through the garrison's outer wall, but their progress was slowed by mines, felled trees, barbed wire and gunfire. By midday, the demoralised SS soldiers fled, and the marines, whose captain was wounded, had also had enough. Fighting on the first day had cost 82 Germans lives, but the peninsula didn't fall.

The Germans finally overran the headland after a week of dogged fighting, thanks to the support of a torpedo boat and



Polish military cap from 1939. The Polish army was unprepared for war.

60 aircraft, which dropped over 100 bombs. On 7th September at 09.45, the exhausted Polish defenders finally hoisted the white flag.

The entire Polish army continued to stubbornly resist despite the Germans' being the superior force on paper. The invasion comprised two armies of 882,000 and 630,000 men respectively. The first group attacked from the north, while the second advanced from the west and south. The German army was modern and well-organised, while many of the Polish units had been mobilised at the last minute.

Hitler expected a quick victory, but the Poles' robust defence spelled potential danger for the Führer's ambitions. The jokers in the pack were Britain and France – World War I's two major victors. If Hitler's army became bogged down in a protracted campaign in Poland, Germany's west flank would be left exposed. If Britain and France immediately went on the offensive, they could end the Nazi dictator's campaign before it began.

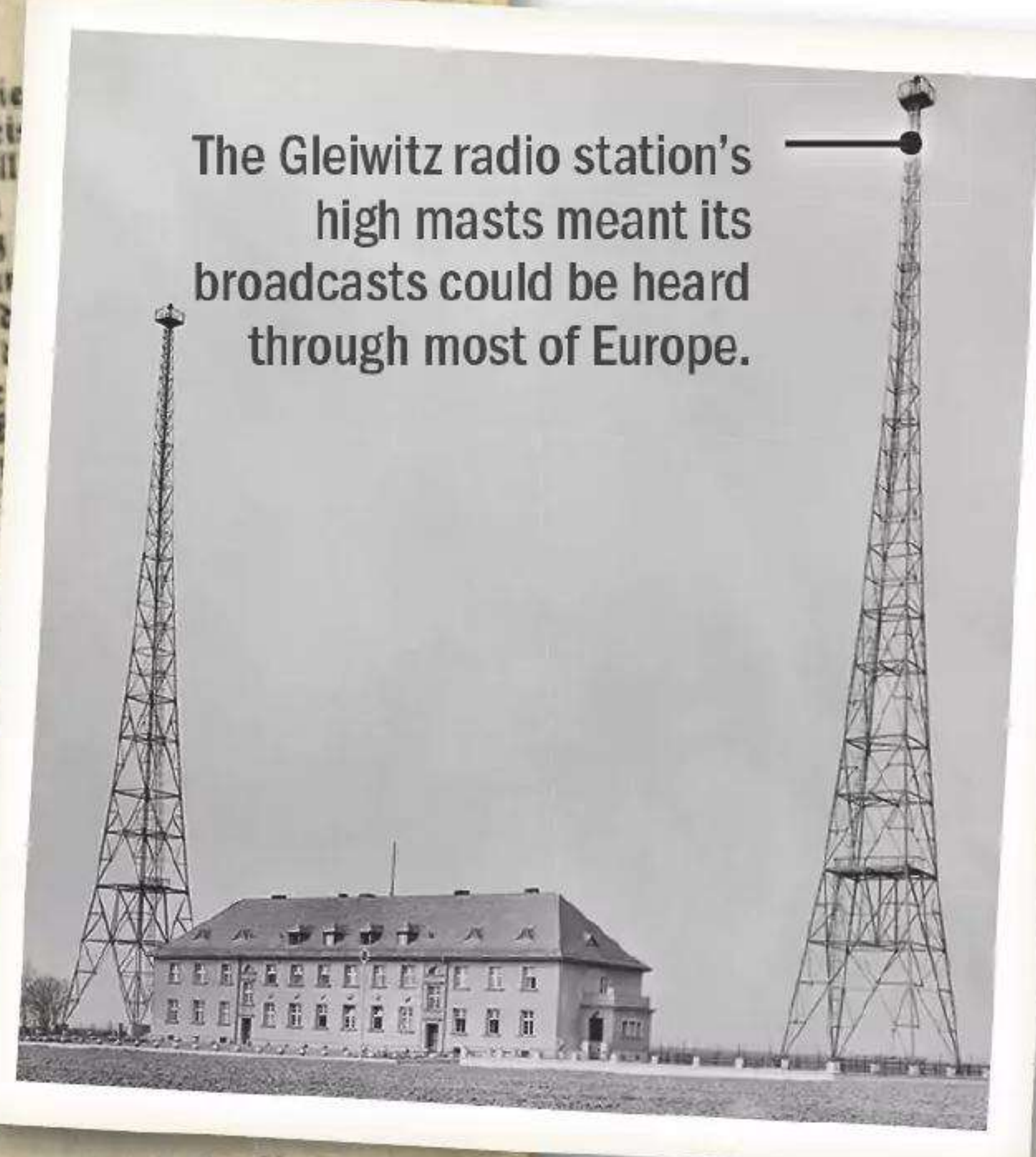
### WESTERN POWERS RULED BY FRIGHTENED MEN

Hitler had good reason to believe that the two great powers would hesitate, however. At the Munich Conference in 1938, he'd insisted that Czechoslovakia cede the predominantly German-speaking Sudetenland to Germany, and both French and British prime ministers – Édouard Daladier and Neville Chamberlain respectively – had agreed to his demands. Their capitulation convinced Hitler that France and Britain were ruled by frightened, easily manipulated men.

Hitler saw no reason to curtail his territorial plundering. In March 1939, he subjugated the rest of the Czech territory –

Bohemia and Moravia – and converted the Slovak part of the former Czechoslovakia into a German puppet state with free passage for German troops. His aggressive manoeuvres were forming a net around Poland, which was now surrounded by German troops on three sides.

An invasion of Poland would allow the dictator to avenge the wrongs he believed to have been committed in World War I, in



The Gleiwitz radio station's high masts meant its broadcasts could be heard through most of Europe.

The SS conducted a fake attack on the radio station at Gleiwitz to give Hitler a pretext to invade Poland.

## Polen überfallen den Gleiwitzer Sender

Aufländische überschritten die deutsche Grenze — Kämpfe mit deutscher Polizei

dnb. Breslau, 31. August.  
Etwa um 20 Uhr heute Abend wurde der Sender Gleiwitz durch einen polnischen Überfall heftig. Die Polen drangen mit Gewalt in den Senderraum ein. Es gelang ihnen, einen polnischen Aufruhr in polnischer und zum Teil deutscher Sprache zu verlesen. Sie wurden aber schon nach wenigen Minuten von der Polizei überwältigt, die von Gleiwitzer Rundfunkschülern alarmiert worden war. Die Polizei mußte von der Waffe Gebrauch machen, wobei es auf beiden Seiten Einbringung Tote gegeben hat.

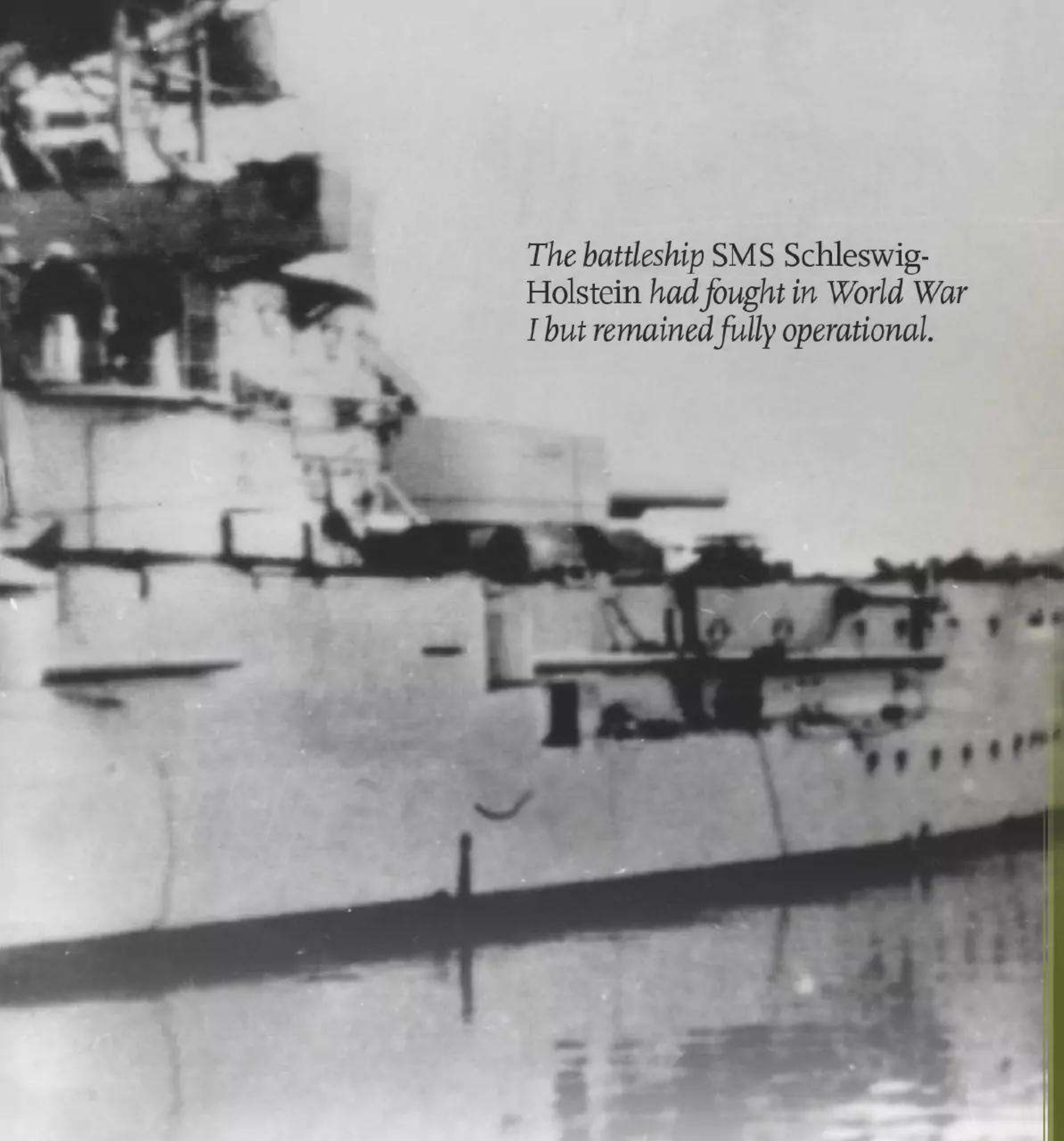
dnb. Oppeln, 31. August.  
Über die Vorgänge in Gleiwitz wird noch folgendes bekannt:

Der Überfall auf den Sender war offensichtlich das Signal zu einem allgemeinen Aufruhr polnischer Freischärler auf deutscher Gebiete. Etwa zur gleichen Zeit haben polnische Aufständische, wie bisher festgestellt werden konnte, an zwei weiteren Stellen die deutsche Grenze überschritten. Es handelte sich wieder um schwerbewaffnete Abteilungen, die anscheinend von regulären polnischen Truppenteilen unterstützt werden.

Litauen in jedem Fall streng neutral

Romano, 31. August.





*The battleship SMS Schleswig-Holstein had fought in World War I but remained fully operational.*

which Germany had been forced to cede lands to Poland, including the coal-rich region of Upper Silesia. The Treaty of Versailles had also seen the port city of Danzig become a free city administered by the People's Confederation (the forerunner of the UN). And worst of all from a German point of view, Poland had been granted the Polish Corridor. This was a stretch of land that cut between Germany and East Prussia and gave Poland access to the Baltic Sea. It was an arrangement many Germans found deeply humiliating.

In addition to the desire to regain lands lost at the end of World War I, Nazi racial ideology dictated that Germany was entitled to Lebensraum – a colonial settlement of Eastern Europe, at the expense of what the Germans perceived to be a subhuman Slavic population.

During 1939, several signs of impending aggression emerged: on 22nd March, the Germans occupied the Lithuanian port of Memel (now Klaipėda), which until 1919 had been in German hands. Hitler also demanded that Danzig be reunited with Germany and that his government be granted rights to build transport links across the Polish Corridor.

### **GUARANTEE INFURIATED HITLER**

The diplomatic row between Germany and Poland forced Britain to intervene. On 31st March in the House of Commons, Chamberlain proclaimed that Britain would support Polish independence and Danzig's continued status as a free city. The British guarantee angered Hitler. At the same time, it became clear to the Führer that Polish leaders intended to cede few – if any – concessions to Germany in the corridor, let alone voluntarily join the pro-German bloc. The Nazi dictator became convinced that the Polish question would have to be solved by military means.

By this point, Hitler had already ordered his generals to begin forming a detailed plan for an attack on Poland under the

**1.4 million**

German soldiers invaded Poland, supported by 2,600 tanks and 2,000 aircraft. Against them stood just 700,000 Polish soldiers with 750 tanks and 900 aircraft.

## **Fierce battles bolstered both sides' morale**

The garrison at Westerplatte wasn't well known in 1939, but the location of the war's first battle proved to be hugely symbolic.

**T**he Polish garrison on the Westerplatte peninsula proved far harder to defeat than German commanders had envisioned. While their eventual victory proved symbolic for the invaders, the dogged defence also played a central role in bolstering Polish morale.

The capture of Westerplatte was so important that Hitler visited the battlefield after the fighting. He inspected the ruins and went aboard the battleship *SMS Schleswig-Holstein*, which launched the bombardment.

For Polish soldiers across the country, the defence of Westerplatte gave them the faith to fight on. The garrison's heroics also had an effect on the Germans who allowed its commander, Major Henryk Sucharski, to keep his sword after surrendering.

codename *Fall Weiss* (Operation White). However, several of his commanders were sceptical and believed that Hitler's scheme was too risky. Their fears were well founded. In May 1939, Poland's Minister of Military Affairs, Lieutenant-General

Tadeusz Kasprzycki, travelled to Paris to sign the Kasprzycki-Gamelin Convention. This committed the French army to launching a massive attack on Germany with 38 divisions within 15 days of Poland being attacked. But despite the commanders' scepticism, in spring 1939 Hitler still believed that Western European powers would not intervene. The head of the Luftwaffe, Hermann Göring, suggested that the Führer might adopt a more cautious approach, but Hitler responded that he had always gone for broke: "I have played *va banque* all my life", he said.

The generals presented the *Fall Weiss* strategy on 15th June 1939. The plan was straightforward: Army Group North comprising two armies would attack the



# Poles caught in deadly crossfire

Poland had Europe's fourth largest army in 1939, but its equipment was outdated and relatively few soldiers had been mobilised when the Germans invaded. A difficult situation became impossible when the Soviet Union also attacked from the east.

## 2 Hitler goes to the front

**4th September:** the campaign begins smoothly with the advance guard penetrating far into the country. By 4th September, Hitler is visiting areas close to the front.

*Hitler felt safe enough to visit units near the front.*



## 1 Germany crosses border

**1st September:** German troops invade Poland from the north (East Prussia), west (Germany) and south (Slovakia). The army makes gains everywhere despite a number of significant losses.

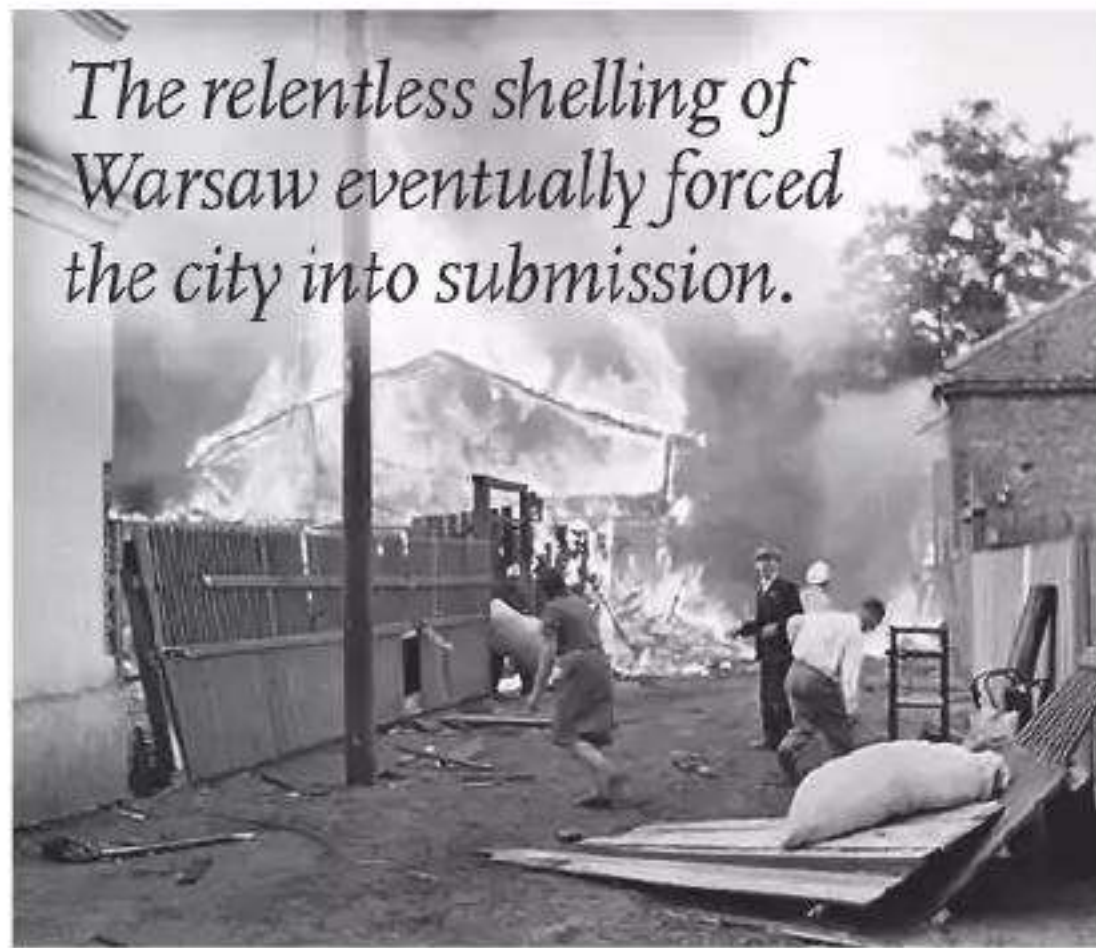
## 6 Germans celebrate victory

**6th October:** when the battle of Kock ends, the last Polish forces surrender. Poland is fully occupied by the Soviet Union and Germany. On 5th October, the Germans hold a victory parade in Warsaw.

## 5 Capital is forced to surrender

**27th September:** Warsaw falls. After intense bombing by aircraft and artillery, the Polish capital surrenders. Much of the city is destroyed, and around 25,000 civilians have been killed.

*The relentless shelling of Warsaw eventually forced the city into submission.*



## 3 Poles hit back

**9th September:** the Polish Army counterattacks by the River Bzura. It enjoys initial success before the Germans bring in reinforcements, winning the battle just 10 days later.



## 4 Soviets invade from the east

**17th September:** following their agreement with Germany, the Soviets invade Eastern Poland. A war on two fronts is too much for the Poles and the Soviets advance quickly and easily.

*About 60 German divisions took part in the campaign against Poland, and the panzer units in particular enjoyed easy successes on the flat terrain.*



northern part of Poland, while Army Group South's three armies would invade from the south. But there was still one unresolved question: how would the Soviet Union react to its neighbour being invaded by Germany?

Joseph Stalin had watched Hitler's manoeuvring in Europe with great interest. The Soviet dictator harboured his own territorial ambitions, including the subjugation of the Baltic nations, parts of Finland, Bessarabia (an area spanning parts of modern-day Moldova and Ukraine) and Eastern Poland. The territories had belonged to the Russian Tsarist Empire and Stalin considered them to be a part of the Soviet Union.

The solution to both nations' desire for enlargement came through a mutual agreement. On 23rd August, German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop boarded a flight to Moscow. Early the next day, von Ribbentrop and his Soviet colleague Vyacheslav Molotov signed the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. The two countries pledged neutrality in case of war with a third party. But the pact also included a secret protocol that allowed Eastern Europe to be divided according to Soviet and German interests. Germany's included Western Poland, while the Soviets claimed Finland and Eastern Poland. The agreement gave Germany a free hand to occupy half of Poland without provoking the Soviet Union, while Stalin could subdue the old Russian territories.

With the agreement in place, Hitler was ready to launch his campaign in the East, and on 25th August 1939, German troops were ordered to launch their attack the following day. But at the last minute, the Führer hesitated and rescinded the order. However, the message did not reach all sections, and several Wehrmacht units made small inroads into Polish territory. The Polish military ordered a full, if hasty, mobilisation of its forces in response on 31st August.

Hitler's hesitation was due in part to Chamberlain's promise, made on 24th August, that Britain would offer military support in the event of a German attack on Poland. But the delay also gave the dictator the opportunity to secure a



NAME	<b>VYACHESLAV MOLOTOV</b>
TITLE	POLITICIAN AND DIPLOMAT

**Soviet politician was demoted**

Molotov was one of Stalin's closest allies, and was trusted with signing the non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union in August 1939 that led to the invasion of Poland. Molotov held several prominent positions, but later fell out of favour and was demoted to Ambassador of Mongolia in 1957.

- Secretary of the Central Committee.
- Foreign Minister 1939-49, 1953-56.

1890-1986  
○○○



pretext for his attack. If Hitler could claim that the Poles had struck first, it would be a useful weapon in a war of propaganda.

### FARMER BECAME THE WAR'S FIRST VICTIM

On the evening of 31st August, 27-year-old SS-Sturmabführer Alfred Helmut Naujocks, together with a small handful of SS soldiers disguised as Poles, reached the radio transmitter in Gleiwitz (now Gliwice), a small town in what was then German territory, near the Polish border. The SS soldiers had no trouble penetrating the building where the radio transmitter was located. The concierge had left his post and the two police officers who normally guarded the transmitter had been hoodwinked into being elsewhere. In the transmitter room itself, the soldiers attacked four men and led them down to the basement. Then the SS soldiers

broadcast a radio message, partly in Polish: "Achtung, achtung! This is Gleiwitz. The radio station is in Polish hands". The spokesman referred to himself as a Polish



**PzKpfw II (Panzerkampfwagen II)**

Weight	8.9 tonnes
Crew	3 men
Main weapon	20-mm gun
Top speed	40 km/h
Armour	5-14 mm
Number in 1939	1,223

#### GUN SMASHED THROUGH ARMOUR

PzKpfw II was armed with a 20-mm gun, which could penetrate the armour of all contemporary Polish tanks. PzKpfw II was a big improvement over its predecessor, which had only two machine guns. The Germans organised the tanks into highly efficient special operational units.



**7TPjw**

Weight	9.9 tonnes
Crew	3 men
Main weapon	37-mm gun
Top speed	37 km/h
Armour	5-17 mm
Number in 1939	95

#### TANKS WERE OUTNUMBERED

In 1935 the Polish Army ordered its own version of Britain's Vickers tank. The first version, named 7TPjw, was the best Polish tank in 1939 and was superior to most German tanks. But the Poles didn't have enough of them to make a decisive difference to the war's outcome.





*German troops met almost no resistance in places like Sopot when they crossed the border.*

freedom fighter and read an anti-German statement that ended with the words "Long live Poland".

### POLES WENT ON THE DEFENSIVE

The German plan was to surround and then destroy the Polish army as quickly as possible, allowing German troops to be redeployed back home to counter any French offensive.

The Poles' plan, however, was to pursue a dilatory and defensive war to allow the country time to complete its delayed mobilisation and give the French and British an opportunity to attack the Germans from the west.

Unfortunately, not all the Polish units were prepared for a modern war. It was one of few countries to have maintained a large cavalry, which proved to be no match for the German war machine. On the first day of the invasion near Krojanty in the northern part of the country, a Polish cavalry regiment launched an attack on a German infantry unit. Suddenly, armoured vehicles burst out of a nearby forest to attack the regiment. Around 20 riders – including the commander – were killed before the remaining soldiers managed to turn their horses and escape.

Despite mounting fierce opposition, the Polish troops were slowly retreating. German Stuka dive bombers posed a serious threat to both ground forces and civilians who fled in their thousands. From the beginning of the invasion, the Luftwaffe terrorised towns and villages. The idea was to wear down the resistance of the Polish people so that the country would be forced to surrender. In the 40 days it took to subjugate Poland, more than 150,000 civilians were killed.

Despite the catastrophic situation, many Poles still clung to the hope of help arriving from Britain and France. On the evening of 1st September, their prayers seemed to be answered: the British demanded that Germany cease its hostilities against Poland and immediately withdraw their

troops. But the British set no time limit. The French for their part put off making a formal declaration of war for two to three days to give the French reserve forces time to move into position. After consulting with the French prime minister, Chamberlain decided to issue a final ultimatum to the Germans on 2nd September. The notice was to be conveyed by the British ambassador in Berlin, Neville Henderson, to Germany's foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop the following morning.

### THE FÜHRER FROZE

A little before 09.00, Henderson arrived at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, von Ribbentrop did not want to meet the ambassador. Instead, he left his interpreter, Paul Schmidt, to meet with Henderson while he was driven to the Reich Chancellery. Schmidt and Henderson stood awkwardly facing one another in the foreign secretary's office as the British ambassador read out the ultimatum: "If His Majesty's Government has not received satisfactory assurances of the cessation of all aggressive action against Poland, and the withdrawal of German troops from that country, by 11 o'clock British Summer Time, from that time a state of war will exist between Great Britain and Germany."

Schmidt put the ultimatum in his bag and hurried to the Reich Chancellery, where he related the British terms to von Ribbentrop and

Hitler, who was seated behind his desk.

"When I finished there was complete silence. Hitler sat immobile, gazing before him," the interpreter later recounted. After a while, Hitler turned towards the foreign minister with a furious look and asked in a tone that suggested he had been ill-advised: "What now?"

Von Ribbentrop replied, "I assume that the French will hand in a similar ultimatum within the hour." Only 20 minutes after the expiry of the deadline, Berlin rejected



*The Infantry Assault Badge was given to Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht soldiers after the campaign against Poland.*



Britain's demands. But by then the British government had already declared war on Germany. Almost six hours later, the French declaration that von Ribbentrop predicted arrived.

That same evening, the German dictator, worrying about a great European war that he had hoped to avoid, boarded his private armoured train to visit the front in Poland. Before the train departed, however, Hitler confided to his trusted propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, that he still believed that Britain and France would only conduct a *kartfferelkreig* (potato war): an economic blockade, rather than all-out war.

GERMAN PINCERS SNAPPED SHUT

Things seemed to be going to plan for Hitler's troops in Poland. The Wehrmacht had already taken several towns and, in the south-west of Poland, German tanks crossed the River Warta. Despite declaring war, the British and French governments seemed reluctant to intervene.

On 6th September, the Germans captured Krakow, and on the same day the British Military Mission in Poland sent an ominous report to London stating that "the two most dangerous [German] attacks at present are those of the motorised groups from Silesia and the forces moving southwards on Warsaw from East Prussia. Should these two arms of the pincers succeed in effecting a junction, a large portion of the old Polish Army might be surrounded". The situation was dire for the Poles, and their commanders urgently needed to find an effective response to the German offensive.

The Polish army's answer came on 9th September, when a counteroffensive led by General Tadeusz Kutrzeba was launched at the Bzura River just over 100 kilometres west of Warsaw. The general's aim was to interrupt the Germans' advance towards the Polish capital and at the same time recapture the towns of Leczyca and Piatek further south. In

the beginning, Kutrzeba benefitted from a tailwind, because the Germans underestimated the size of the Polish forces. The Poles entered Leczyca, where fierce house-to-house fighting took place, then after several attempts, they also succeeded in taking Piatek.

A German company, which was defending one of the approach roads to the city, came under heavy shelling and sought cover in trenches left over from World War I. The company commander, Captain Christian Kinder, subsequently wrote about the incident in his book *Männer der Nordmark an der Bzura*.

"In intervals of three to five minutes, hand and rifle grenades landed in the company's trenches. This section was methodically and with surprising accuracy from the right to the left bombarded... Two men very near to the Company were riddled with fine fragments and were killed immediately... each man now literally felt the moment come when the next hand grenade would strike him."

Christian Kinder was one of the few men from the

After the war, von Ribbentrop was convicted of crimes against humanity and hanged.



1893-1946



JOACHIM VON RIBBENTROP

NAME

TITLE

FOREIGN MINISTER

Top Nazi pursued Jews throughout Europe

As a well-travelled businessman Joachim von Ribbentrop had a better knowledge of world politics than most senior Nazis. Following his enrolment in the Nazi Party in 1932, he dreamed of a career as Reich Minister for Foreign Affairs. Hitler first sent von Ribbentrop to London as an ambassador, but in 1938 his dream came true when he succeeded Konstantin von Neurath as head at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Von Ribbentrop's proudest moment came in 1939 when, along with his Soviet colleague Molotov, he signed a non-aggression pact between the two countries. Elsewhere, his role included helping to exterminate Jews in occupied countries, which was principally the reason for his later war crimes conviction.

- > German Foreign Minister 1938-45.
- > Stood trial at Nuremberg and was executed in 1946.





*Nine-year-old Ryszard Pajewski sits in the ruins of what was once his home in Warsaw.*

company to survive the fighting. The following day, two German infantry divisions withdrew in chaos. One of the divisions reported to headquarters that the situation was “exceptionally serious” and urged it to send reinforcements. Captain Kinder noted that some of his men, “shaken by the superior power of the enemy, were beginning to be resigned”.

The German soldiers’ fighting spirit was further weakened when Polish cavalry attacked them from the rear.

#### **POLES LOST COMMUNICATIONS**

Shortly after, German High Command reacted by reorganising its forces. At the same time, Polish troops ran into trouble. The units had no air support, and in some places even had to advance without cover from artillery or proper communication, partly because their phone lines had been destroyed. Yet the Poles managed to advance for two days before the Germans beat them back during an attack on 11th

September, where they recaptured several kilometres of territory. The following day, the German forces – which now possessed four times as many tanks as the Poles – were on the front foot once more.

#### **560 tonnes**

**of explosives and 70 tonnes of firebombs were dropped by the Luftwaffe over Warsaw during the final days of the campaign, turning the city into an inferno.**

Now it was Kutrzeba’s turn to regroup, which gave the Germans time to bring up reinforcements. On 16th September, a German armoured corps attacked from the east, and an armoured division broke through a Polish infantry division’s line of defence. Kutrzeba’s forces were surrounded and the Luftwaffe relentlessly attacked the encircled Polish troops.

Polish cavalryman Klemens Rudnicki was one of the lucky ones who escaped the pocket. But his fleeing unit was ambushed and surrounded by German forces in a nearby forested area. The Polish cavalry dismounted and fought on the ground: “bullets buzzed like wasps; the artillery began to respond; it was quite impossible to emerge from the forest”,



Rudnicki wrote later. Only after dark did the Polish cavalry succeed in escaping.

By 21st September, the Battle of Bzura was over. Two Polish armies were shattered, and 100,000 soldiers were either dead or in German captivity. The road to Warsaw was now open for the German main force to join the foremost panzer units, which had reached the city walls on 7th September.

Over the following days, a trinity of tanks, artillery and aircraft bombarded the Polish capital. A Polish officer who participated in the defence of the Warsaw district of Praga described the attacks on 10th September in his diary: "The nerves of the people are still frayed from yesterday's shelling. All about us buildings lie in ruins. The fire at the Transfiguration hospital with its several hundred wounded was a ghastly business. I saw a soldier with both legs amputated crawling from the building on his elbows; other wounded jumped out of the windows on the pavement. Five doctors and several nurses perished in the fire."

By mid-September, Warsaw was completely surrounded. The Germans demanded that the capital surrender, but the commander of the city's defence stubbornly refused.

### DOOMED CITY WOULD NOT GIVE UP

By the end of September 1939, the city had a post-apocalyptic air. The bodies of people and horses filled the streets, much of the city lay in ruins, and water pipes, electricity, hospitals and railway stations were smashed. The survivors were starving, drinking water was running out and doctors warned of the risk of disease.

The situation in Warsaw stemmed from Hitler's dissatisfaction that the city had not yet surrendered. As the city continued to hold out, the impatient Führer ordered the Luftwaffe to carry out a relentless bombing campaign. On 25th September, 1,200 aircraft attacked the city. The crews bombed both the capital's industrial estates and residential areas. The following day, the artillery arrived to join in the shelling, while the infantry stormed the condemned city as it burned.

Finally, on 27th September Warsaw gave up the struggle. 30,000 people had been killed in the inferno, but there was more bad news for the beleaguered Poles: on 17th September, Stalin's Red Army had crossed Poland's eastern border, and by the time Warsaw surrendered, the Soviet forces were already at the line agreed by Ribbentrop and Molotov. Stalin and Hitler were well on their way to wiping the democratic Polish nation off the map.

The Polish government had already fled to Romania and on 6th October, the last Polish forces surrendered. The Polish army had suffered a loss of 70,000 dead and 133,000 wounded in the war against the Germans, while another 50,000 had fallen in the fighting with the Red Army. In comparison, the Germans reported losses of just 11,000 dead and 30,000 people wounded.

So far, Hitler was winning his high-stakes game: he had captured Western Poland without Britain or France having actively intervened. But now that the two countries had declared war, there were new players at the table and the endgame was far from certain.

# Polish army was exiled

Poland's defeat marked the end of Poland's army. Many soldiers fled when the country surrendered, but later played an important role in the war.

Although Hitler's troops surrounded large parts of the Polish army, many soldiers and pilots managed to escape. Almost 100,000 men crossed the border into Romania, which was still neutral at that time. The vast majority went on to France, where 75,000 Polish soldiers participated in the fight against Nazi Germany in 1940. When France also fell, the Poles fled to Britain. If you include Polish deserters forced to fight in the German army, the number of Poles fighting in exile during the war was around 250,000.

During the Battle of Britain in 1940, Polish pilots played a particularly vital role. Although the Poles only made up five percent of the pilots in the Royal Air Force, they accounted for 12 percent of the RAF's victories in the battle. Of the 1,736 aircraft the Germans lost, 203 were shot down by Polish pilots.

A significant part of the Polish fleet also escaped. Many of the ships reached Britain and took part in the sinking of the great German Battleship *Bismarck* in May 1941.

*Many Poles received medals for their efforts on the Western Front.*



*Polish fighter pilots had their own squadron based in England.*



• HISTORY'S BIGGEST CAMPAIGN •

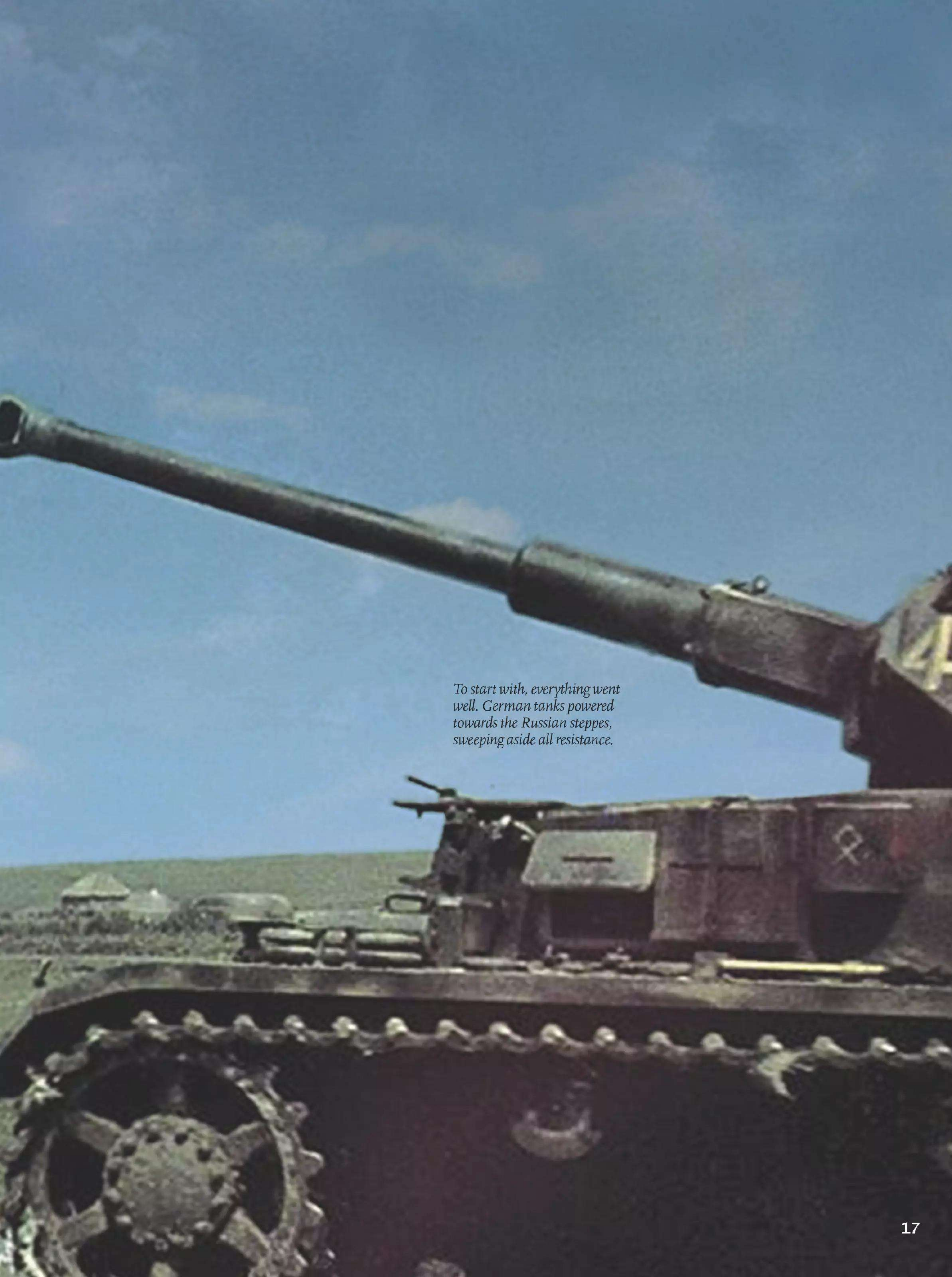
# HITLER TRIUMPHS OVER RED ARMY

In June 1941, Hitler launches a surprise attack on the Soviet Union. 3.7 million soldiers storm over the border in an incredible display of German Blitzkrieg, but Stalin's enormous empire turns out to be a tough nut to crack, even for the usually victorious invading forces.

1941

22<sup>ND</sup> JUNE





*To start with, everything went well. German tanks powered towards the Russian steppes, sweeping aside all resistance.*



## Eastern Front 1941

## THE STAGE IS SET



World War II has been raging for two years. From Norway to the Balkans, Europe has been occupied by German troops, and Hitler now looks to the east. The Nazis are ready for their showdown against Communism and the Soviets; 3.7 million soldiers are prepared for the invasion, history's largest ever military operation.



**T**HE SKY ABOVE LIEUTENANT SIEGFRIED KNAPPE'S OBSERVATION POST was already growing lighter as daybreak approached. It was 03.14 on 22nd June – the longest day of the year was about to begin. The smell of pine needles hung in the air at the German-Soviet border in the middle of what – until 1939 – had been Poland.

The calm was not to last. Knappe had spent most of the night inspecting his troops, who now stood ready with their loaded guns. But they were by no means the only ones awake at that hour. Along a 1,800-kilometre line that stretched from the Baltic in the north to Romania in the south, millions of

German soldiers were ready for battle. The men checked their watches, inspected their weapons one last time, and thought of their families as their sharpened senses picked out the first birdsong of the day.

A moment later, the tension broke. While the Luftwaffe headed for targets behind the Red Army's lines, the artillery received orders to open fire. Along the entire front, thousands of German guns launched a bombardment. Black and yellow smoke

filled the air, and the stench of gunpowder reached the German officer's nostrils. For 15 merciless minutes, the thunder of firing guns filled the air. Then Knappe heard the "pop" of a flare, and the morning sky turned red.

Knappe's artillery ceased firing. Now it was the turn of the infantry, which launched its assault on the Soviet outposts. The dreaded German tanks would soon follow – the vanguard of Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union.

With 3.7 million German, Finnish, Italian, Romanian, Slovak and Hungarian soldiers, the invasion was the largest military operation the world had ever seen. After just a few weeks of fighting, victory seemed inevitable – yet another example of the frightening power of German Blitzkrieg.

As in Poland in 1939 and France in 1940, the German Panzer divisions hammered deeply into enemy territory, while the Luftwaffe removed all obstacles in front of them. City after city fell against the overwhelming force.

#### HITLER'S AIM WAS TO ERADICATE COMMUNISM

The Nazi leader had already described his dream of crushing the Soviet Union in his two-volume *Mein Kampf*, published in 1925-26. Communism had to be destroyed, the Slavic people subjugated, and the wide-open plains of the east given over to German colonisation. The planning of Operation Barbarossa



The 1942 medal was awarded to Germans who had participated in the first winter of the campaign.



began in secrecy in the summer of 1940. At that point, Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union were bound to each other by treaty. The two regimes were ideological opposites, but 1939's Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact saw them sign a non-aggression treaty, and agree to divide up central Europe between them.

The deal with Stalin had ensured peace on Germany's eastern border while Hitler invaded Poland and subjugated Western Europe, but by halfway through 1940, it had served its purpose. Hitler decided to break the agreement with the Soviet Union, as he'd done with other treaties. Now, in one stroke, he wanted to eliminate Communism and destroy the last remaining power that stood between him and his total domination of Europe. Victory over the Soviet Union would also give him control of Ukraine's huge agricultural output and an endless flow of oil from the Caucasus.

Preparations for Operation Barbarossa took place in an atmosphere of complacency among the German General Staff. That spring, Germany had defeated the French army – considered the best in the world – in just six weeks. Hitler and his generals were counting on an even easier victory in the Soviet Union, because according to Nazi ideology, they would be facing subhuman Slavs (*untermensch*).

The Red Army had merely confirmed this prejudice with its incompetent efforts in the winter war – 500,000 men had attacked Finland in November 1939, but the campaign was a disaster. Stalin's troops suffered one humiliating defeat after another against the stubborn Finns. Only its huge numerical advantage secured the Soviet Union a modest victory four months later. The Germans' arrogance led to a plan of attack that placed huge demands on the German war machine. Generals ignored the fact that factories couldn't possibly deliver tanks in the quantities required and that supplies wouldn't be able to keep up if the armoured divisions advanced as fast and as far as the operational plans dictated.

Problems in the Balkans delayed the attack on the Soviets. Hitler's Italian allies had invaded Greece, but the campaign was a shambles. Mussolini's forces were sent packing as the



*Hitler and his generals thought that the Red Army was inept, and the campaign would last no more than six weeks.*

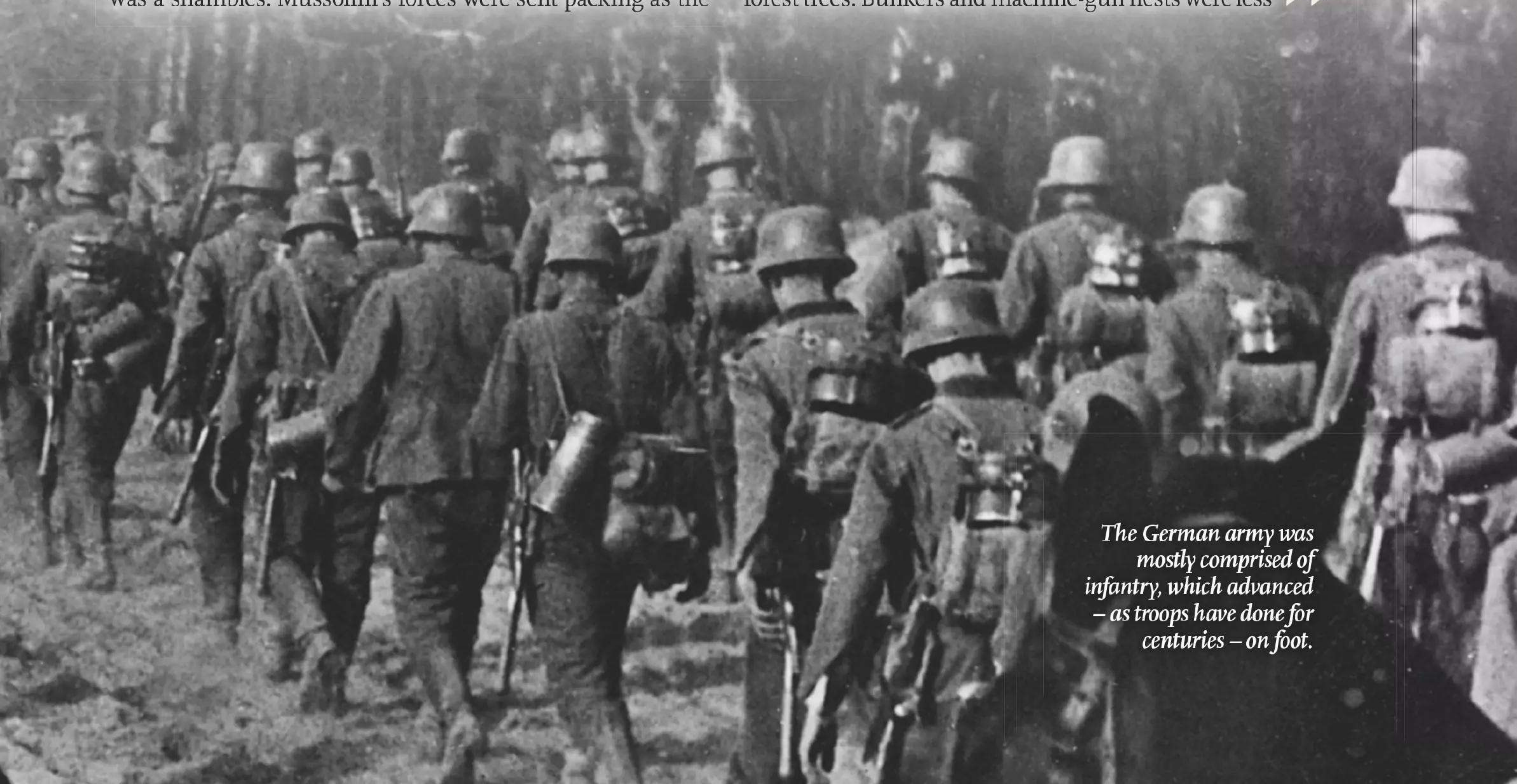
Greeks received British reinforcements. Operation Barbarossa had to be postponed from 15th May 1941 to 22nd June to give the Wehrmacht (German armed forces) time to clean up the chaos in the Balkans.

Eight days before Barbarossa was launched, Hitler held court with the military's top brass at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. He listened to his generals' plans before giving his own assessment: the Red Army would put up a strong defence, but the campaign would be over in six weeks.

### **GERMANS SNEAKED UP TO THE BORDER**

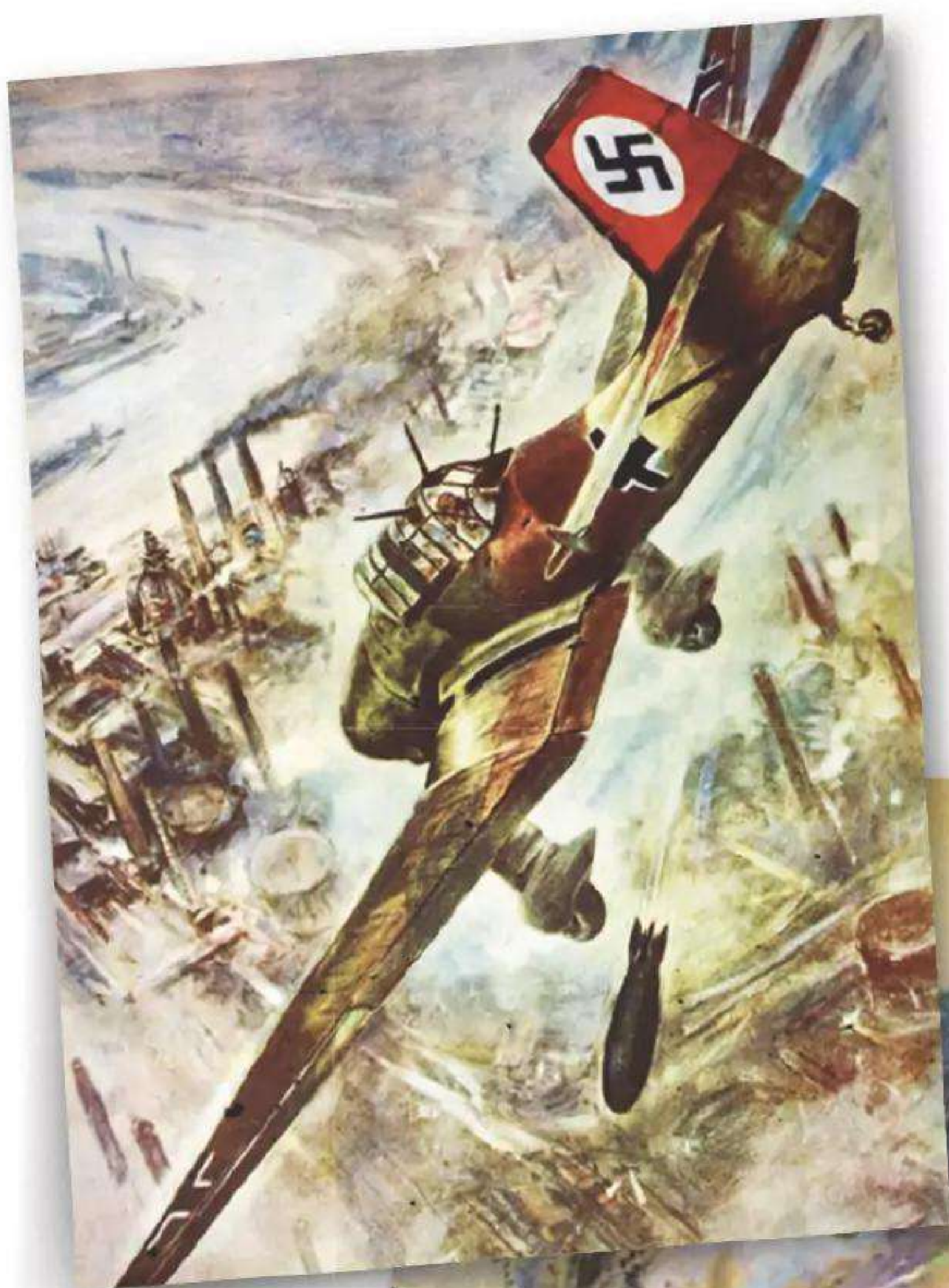
While dignitaries in Berlin toasted their plans with champagne, life as he knew it was about to end for Hans Roth. The 28-year-old soldier had to leave his comfortable garrison life in the south-eastern Polish city of Zamosc, with its beautiful market place and opulent baroque mansions.

His unit had been ordered to move down to the River Bug, to spy on the Soviet border defences. On the far bank of the slow-moving waterway, he could see the Soviet Union's red flag, with its hammer and sickle, flying above the forest trees. Bunkers and machine-gun nests were less



*The German army was mostly comprised of infantry, which advanced – as troops have done for centuries – on foot.*





*Propaganda used every available channel. Idealised images of the German Blitzkrieg were even printed on postcards.*



than 100 metres away. If an overzealous Soviet guard spotted the patrol, he'd be able to shoot down Roth and his comrades in an instant: "Are we the scapegoats who are supposed to be slaughtered by the Russians [as an excuse] for the German attack?" he noted with suspicion in his diary.

Roth's patrol crept under cover of vegetation along the riverbank to map out the Soviet positions. From the other side of the water, the sound of armoured vehicles could be heard.

"The Reds have strengthened their positions," Roth concluded. "They appear to have rolled their tanks into position." It seemed the Soviets expected trouble.

Roth was anxious about the reception that awaited them on the other side of the Bug, but he was in no doubt that Germany would prevail once things kicked off, because the forest behind him was quietly being filled with German tanks, artillery and lots and lots of soldiers. Rumours of attack dates spread among the soldiers on the front line. On 19th June, Roth noted in his diary: "Hurray! The greatest battle of all times will begin tomorrow!" He was as sure of victory as Hitler.

However, the attack didn't begin until 22nd June. At 03.15, gunfire lit up the morning sky, while Roth and his comrades, pale and tense, huddled together in their foxholes. Soon the infantry would cross the river and pave the way for the Panzer divisions to advance into the Soviet hinterland.

### STALIN WAS TAKEN BY SURPRISE

The minutes dragged by. Then, at 03.30 exactly, a whistle finally blew – the signal! Hans Roth jumped out of his foxhole and sprinted 20 metres to the inflatable boats that had been brought down to the riverbank under cover of darkness. The soldiers quickly reached the far side, but now faced a Soviet machine gun. Gunfire crackled as the

first men fell lifeless to the ground. The Germans fought fiercely over the barbed-wire barricades and silenced the weapon. Roth's group headed for the bunkers ahead. Operation Barbarossa was underway.

The invasion came as a shock to Stalin. Despite several warnings, he'd believed that the Germans wouldn't be ready to attack until 1942 at the earliest; in fact, the Soviet dictator

thought they might never attack. Stalin was distrustful by nature, but was convinced that his counterpart in Berlin was too dependent on Soviet resources to start a war. Over the past two years, Soviet supplies of oil, minerals and food had kept the Wehrmacht and Germany's war production industries running. It never occurred to Stalin that Hitler would take control of the precious resources by force.

The Red Army was in the middle of a major reorganisation and was caught off guard. During the first day of operations, the Luftwaffe destroyed 1,811 aircraft, 1,489 of which were on the ground. As the German infantry advanced, they encountered illuminated outposts, which were even decorated with portraits of Stalin

and red flags. Few Soviet units had sharpened their readiness in response to the rumours of German troop movements. Many bunkers were neither complete nor fully manned, and there was a lack of weapons everywhere. Soviet reservists were rushed to the front line. Russian police officer Nikolai Yangchuk was posted to Brest (now in Belarus), a little north of where Hans Roth had crossed the river earlier in the morning. Here, he experienced a typical scene when 1,000 men arrived at the train station.

"Don't we get any rifles?" asked the newly arrived soldiers.

"Get to the front," they were told. "You will find some weapons there." The troops had no option but to advance unarmed. At their posts, they had to wait until someone else was hit so they could take their weapon.

The garrison at Brest's old citadel was just as poorly prepared to withstand the German attack. The 19th century fortress could, on paper, accommodate 8,000 Soviet soldiers,

but on the morning of 22nd June, just 3,500 men were present. Nikitina Archinowa was married to a Russian officer and lived in one of the garrison's forts.

She was abruptly awoken by the sound of exploding bombs and grenades. She threw on a coat and hurried out on to the street with her children, where she stopped to take in the nightmarish scene. German bombers swarmed overhead, dropping bombs on the fortress. Men, women and children ran around in confusion, seeking cover. On the ground in front of Archinowa lay a young

woman and her son. They were dead.

### EVERYTHING WENT TO PLAN

Operation Barbarossa's strategy was to attack along three axes. Army Group North was to advance through the Baltic

### 5.7 million

Soviet soldiers ended up in German captivity, where they were sent on endless marches without food or water. Between 2.7 and 3.3 million died before the war ended.



countries, heading for Leningrad. At the opposite end of the front, Army Group South was ready to conquer Ukraine, the Soviet Union's breadbasket. Between the two stood Army Group Centre.

With over half of the German Panzer divisions deployed there, Army Group Centre could advance faster and further than the other two groups. At Moscow, the tanks would turn north and south, and penetrate deep behind the Soviet units that faced Army Groups North and South. The Red Army would be surrounded and destroyed.

Military plans rarely survive the harsh realities of the battlefield, but in its first weeks, Operation Barbarossa ran like clockwork. Once again, the armoured divisions outmanoeuvred an enemy that, on paper, was stronger.

The Red Army had more tanks, more planes and more guns. Even the new Soviet T-34 fighter turned out to be far better than anything the Germans had in their arsenal. Only the German infantry surpassed its opponents in terms of numbers. But the Wehrmacht's real strength lay in its training, experience and effective radio communications. The

Soviets had only a few radios and most tanks communicated using flags.

Operation Barbarossa followed the standard template for Blitzkrieg, which had been thoroughly tested in Poland and France. In just a few days, Army Group Centre surrounded the Belarusian cities of Bialystok and Minsk, cutting off over 300,000 Soviet soldiers. Panzer divisions left them to the German

infantry and advanced rapidly towards Smolensk. By mid-July, the city was surrounded, and two weeks later, the last pockets of resistance were suppressed.

The list of German-captured cities grew almost daily: Sithomir, Chernobyl, Uman, Velikie Luki and Tallinn fell, and Leningrad and Kiev were quickly surrounded, too.

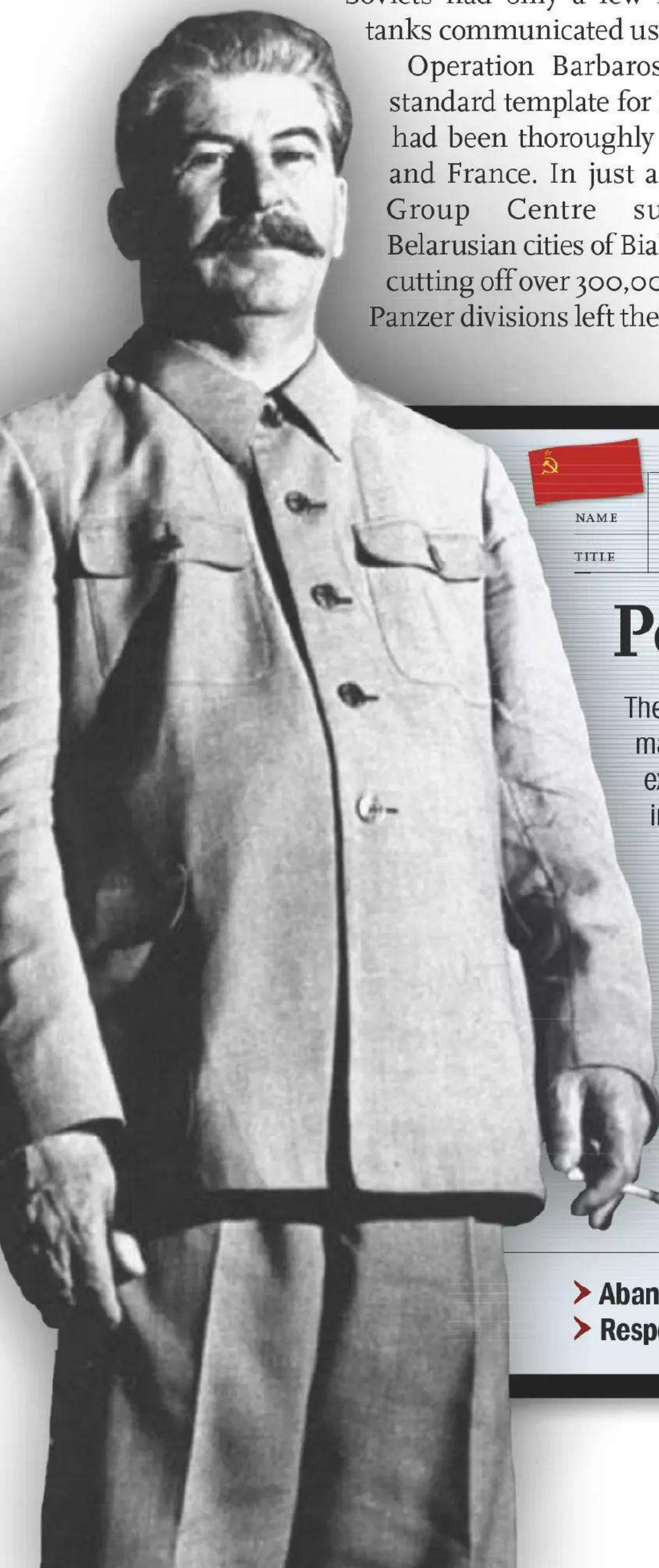
### DISASTER LOOMED

Despite the tally of German triumphs, serious problems began to emerge. Had Operation Barbarossa been planned with less complacency, Hitler and his generals could have foreseen them. The German infantry was constantly struggling to keep up with the advancing Panzer divisions. The soldiers awoke in the middle of the night and marched until late in the evening – usually in roadside fields, to keep out of the way of the long columns of motor vehicles. With blood-shot eyes, cracked lips, and faces smeared with sweat and dust, they pressed onward – 30, 40, 50, even 60 kilometres a day in the summer heat, carrying weapons and heavy backpacks. Every once in a while, the march was interrupted by intense fighting.

"It's getting serious now," Hans Roth wrote in his diary on 13th July. For the first time in days, he'd had a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. Like many of the millions of German soldiers heading east, he was totally exhausted: "I could cry out of anger and frustration. Nothing works



*This badge honoured Soviet troops who fought in 1941-45.*



1878-1953



NAME

**JOSEPH STALIN**

TITLE

GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE SOVIET UNION

## Peasant's son became a dictator

The Soviet Union's notorious dictator was born into a poor peasant family. His mother made sure that 15-year-old Joseph attended a seminary, but shortly before his final exam, Stalin left school to devote himself to political work. He joined the Bolsheviks in 1904 under Vladimir Lenin's leadership. After Lenin's death, Stalin took over the leadership of the party, and from the late 1920s, gradually secured absolute power as dictator of the Soviet Union. But the more power Stalin gained, the more paranoid he became.

During the 1930s, he had all of his political opponents in the party executed, many on false charges. Indiscriminate purges followed – the military lost nearly 40,000 officers and millions of civilians were sent to labour camps. The army cleansings meant that the Soviet Union was practically defenceless when the Germans attacked in 1941. Stalin's tactics, therefore, were to concentrate the army's efforts on major cities, allowing the German invasion forces to reach so far into the Soviet Union that they had difficulty obtaining supplies. He left the final defeat of the Germans to the Russian winter.

- Abandoned the priesthood in favour of a political career.
- Responsible for the deaths of some 55 million Soviet citizens.



# Rapid German offensive forced Soviets back

Stalin's armies had as many tanks, aircraft and guns, but the Wehrmacht was experienced and led by skilled generals. The Germans quickly penetrated deep into the Soviet Union.

## German troops

**Colonel General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst**  
■ 90,000 Germans in northern Finland

## Finnish army

**Marshal Carl Gustaf Mannerheim**  
■ 303,000 Finns

HELSINKI •

LENINGRAD •

BALTIC SEA

• RIGA

• MINSK

## Army Group North

**Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb**  
■ 641,000 men  
■ Three armoured divisions

## Army Group Centre

**General Fedor von Bock**  
■ 1,180,000 men  
■ Nine armoured divisions

## Army Group South

**Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt**  
■ 797,000 Germans  
■ Five armoured divisions  
■ + 146,000 Hungarians and Slovaks

BERLIN •

• WARSAW

GERMANY

— Soviet border

VIENNA •

BUDAPEST •

## Army Group Antonescu

**Marshal Ion Antonescu**  
■ 326,000 Romanians  
■ + 237,000 Germans and Italians

## AXIS + THEIR ALLIES

SOLDIERS:	3,720,000
TANKS:	3,505
AIRCRAFT:	2,995
GUNS:	7,146



*All three German army groups and an allied army group under Romanian command advanced deep into the Soviet Union in just a few months.*

### Leningrad Military District

**General Marklan Popov**  
■ 426,000 men

### Baltic Military District

**General Fyodor Kuznetsov**  
■ Approx 500,000 men

### Western Military District

**General Dmitry Pavlov**  
■ 647,000 men

### Kiev Military District

**General Mikhail Kirponos**  
■ 870,000 men

### Odessa Military District

**General Ivan Tjulenev**  
■ 320,000 men

SOVIET UNION

BLACK SEA

### THE RED ARMY

**SOLDIERS:** 2,763,000

**TANKS:** 14,000

**AIRCRAFT:** 7,133

**GUNS:** 34,700

## Operation Barbarossa begins

The Luftwaffe destroys 1,811 Soviet planes on the first day – 25 percent of Stalin's aircraft in Europe. **Army Group North** marches along the Baltic coast to Leningrad, fighting all resistance in its path.



22ND JUNE

## Road opens to Moscow

**Army Group Centre** surrounds Minsk and captures a large Soviet force. The road to Moscow now lies open, but Hitler divides the army in two and sends them north and south instead.



16TH JULY

## Army halts before Leningrad

Forest and marshland delay **Army Group North's** advance towards Leningrad. Just outside the city, the offensive stops. Leningrad won't be stormed, but its inhabitants will be starved to death instead.



25TH AUGUST

## Kiev caught in German trap

The Red Army has gathered around 600,000 men at Kiev, and **Army Group South** traps them between two armoured divisions. Over 100,000 Soviet soldiers surrender to the Germans.



1ST OCTOBER

## Attack stalls

**Army Group North** is outside Leningrad, while the Red Army halts **Army Group Centre** just kilometres from Moscow. In Ukraine, **Army Group South** occupies all of southern Crimea except Sevastopol.



5TH DECEMBER



anymore. My body does not want to co-operate any longer. My nerves are singing like the wires of a telegraph. Will I ever see my home again?"

The Battle for Brest was an ominous sign for the Germans. Their armoured divisions were already rolling into Smolensk, over 600 km to the east, when the fortress finally fell on 30th July 1941. By that time, the Soviet garrison had held out for six weeks. The German 45th Infantry Division had entered the old fortress on 22nd June, but was met by deadly fire from snipers in basement windows, on roofs and in trees. The attackers withdrew that night after losing 311 men, equivalent to two-thirds of the division's total losses during the campaign in France the previous year. The siege tied up a huge number of German soldiers, preventing them from participating in the advance to the east.

### GERMANS WERE "BLONDE BEASTS"

The German losses grew with alarming speed, because despite the confusion that reigned among the Red Army's leadership, Stalin's troops fought fiercely for every centimetre of Soviet soil. When the Germans crossed the Dubysa river in Lithuania and secured two bridgeheads on the other side, they were forced back by desperate counterattacks that night. German units recaptured the

*The central buildings in Kiev were mined and blown up as the Germans entered the city.*

### Collaborators

*in the Soviet Union often ended up being shot by their countrymen.*

*Groups of partisans resisted the occupation and punished anyone who helped the Germans.*

bridgeheads the following day, which is when they realised how brutal the battle on the Eastern Front would be. The Red Army had left several German corpses with their eyes gouged out or their genitals cut off.

Security behind the front was a growing problem. While the armoured divisions enabled the German war machine to capture vast tracts of land, the forests were still full of Soviet partisans and isolated groups of soldiers. They concentrated their efforts on ambushing vulnerable German supply columns, whose cargo was badly needed at the front.

"We are losing more people to the bandits than in the fighting itself," a German soldier wrote in a letter home to his family in early July 1941.

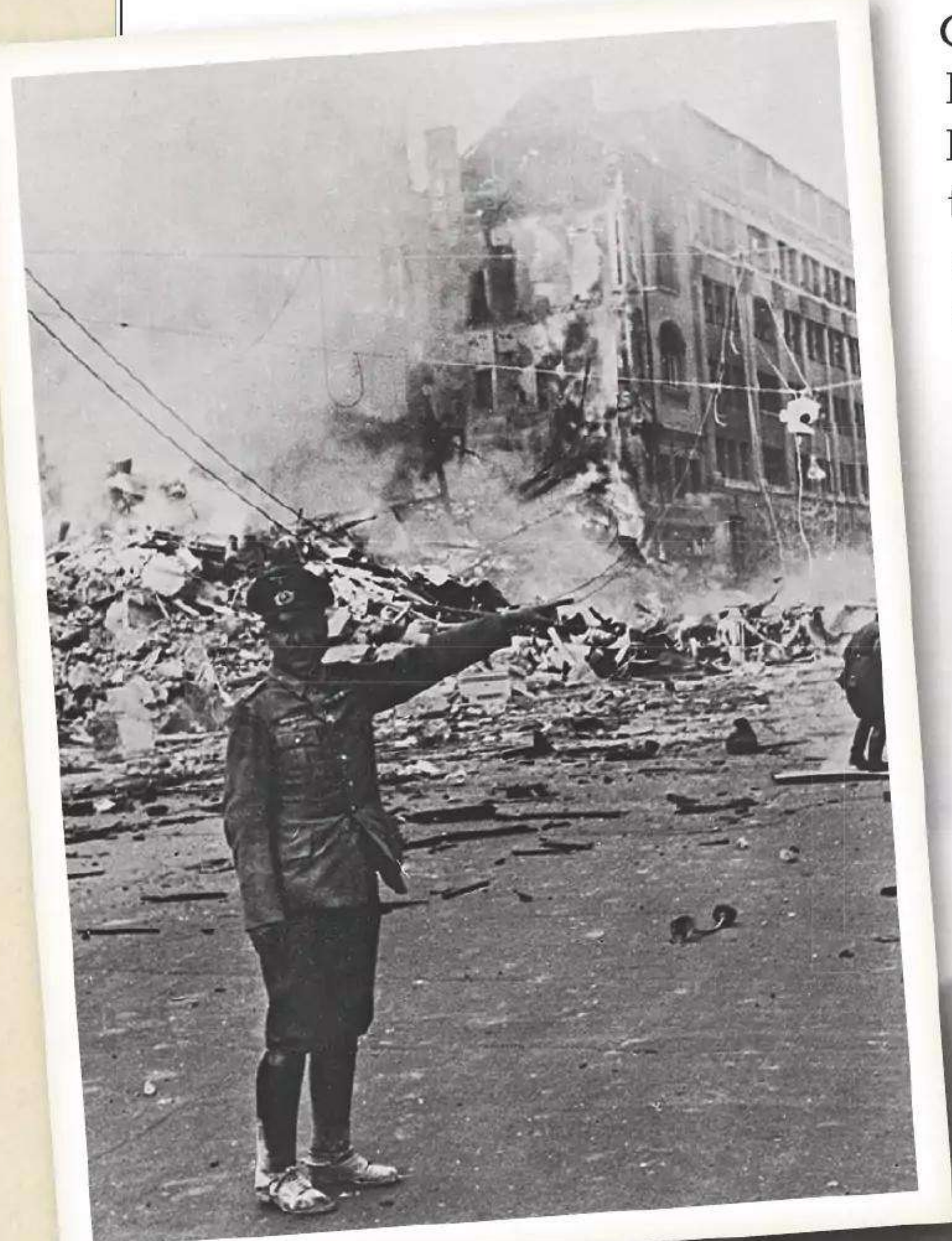
These partisan attacks gave Hitler a pretext for embarking on a war of annihilation. The German high command ordered that the local population be terrorised to such an extent that "it loses all will to resist". A Minsk citizen later described the Germans' treatment of civilians: "There were SS and police patrols day and night with sudden house searches. People were arrested on the slightest pretext, disappearing into Gestapo cellars and then whisked off to be shot. An atmosphere of constant fear reigned in the city."

Alongside the harsh regime, looting became part of everyday life on the Eastern Front. When the supply lines failed, German soldiers simply took what they needed. Eggs, flour, fruit and horses disappeared, and much else was just destroyed.

In a reversal of Nazi race theory, Stalin's propaganda labelled the Germans "blonde beasts"; Hitler's Aryan troops weren't superhuman, but bloodthirsty barbarians.

### CITY BECAME A DEADLY TRAP

The Red Army couldn't halt the Germans' progress, but before they retreated, the Soviets laid traps for the



*Ukrainian farmers burned their crops, leaving no food for the German invasion forces.*





# The Red Army's soldiers were easy to spot

The Soviet army was the world's largest, but its uniforms were impractical and colourful, with large, red emblems. In 1941, they were replaced with khaki combat dress.

UNIFORMS



Officers of the Red Army wore a cap with a red band and green crown.

The bright green crown on the cap and collar insignia showed that the lieutenant was in the Soviet Border Troops.

Wool cap with ear flaps was standard winter equipment for Soviet soldiers.

Two red squares on each collar flap indicated the rank of lieutenant.

Map bag with plastic pocket was part of this officer's field equipment.

## Sergeant

(The Red Army, rifle regiment)

Ammunition was carried in a leather pouch on the rifleman's belt.

Bayonet could be mounted on the rifle barrel and used as a weapon in close combat.

Rifle was a Simonov AVS-36, one of the few Soviet rifles that could be fitted with a bayonet.

Holster held a Nagant revolver with seven shots. The gun was used from 1895 until the 1950s.

## Lieutenant with Soviet Border Troops

(The Red Army)

Trousers were dark blue with red stripes. This pre-war uniform was replaced with khaki trousers.

Two squares on the collar indicated that she was a lieutenant.

Belt with shoulder strap to offset the weight of the revolver on the right. Buckle with star, hammer and sickle.

Footwear could be long riding boots or shoes.

The red cross indicated that it was a medical bag.

## Female lieutenant

(The Red Army, medical corps)

Weapons were not standard equipment for female doctors in 1941. They were armed later in the war.

## ONE IN TEN SOLDIERS FEMALE

FACTS

■ Approximately 800,000 women were engaged in active service in the Red Army. In 1943, that equated to 8–10 percent of Soviet soldiers.

■ Three flight regiments consisted solely of women. One was a fighter regiment, the other two were bomber regiments.

■ Sniper roles were considered suitable for women by the Soviet regime. With 309 kills, Ludmila Pavlichenko was the most sharpshooter.

■ During the war, tanks had more and more women behind the wheel. T-34 driver Mariya Oktyabrskaya was mortally wounded during combat.





*The Red Army was equipped with the classic Russian Maxim-Sokolov machine gun. It was developed back in 1910, but its excellent durability and reliability meant the gun was kept in use until 1945. It was mounted on wheels and was therefore easy to move around.*

invading forces. The soldiers in Roth's unit suspected as much when they marched into Ukraine's capital on 19th September 1941. Kiev's city centre was deserted. The wide boulevards and large open spaces were empty, the silence oppressive. Hans Roth felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He feared a trap – that the tranquillity would be broken by the snarl of machine-gun fire or the blast of explosives.

For three days, the German soldiers had negotiated trap after trap on their way to the city. On top of constant fire from the Red Army, they encountered buried mines, live wires and hidden flamethrowers, all triggered by a careless step.

These experiences left Roth and his comrades believing they wouldn't be able to take Kiev without a fight. But everything remained quiet, and the German troops moved in unopposed. Instead of fighting, the soldiers could look forward to a much-needed rest.

Everyday life returned to the city. Endless trucks, columns of troops and supplies wound through the streets, heading east,

while Kiev's remaining citizens cautiously emerged from where they had been hiding in their cellars. The streets were filled with people and the atmosphere was almost peaceful.

Suddenly, the city was shaken by a massive explosion, throwing rubble and iron girders into the air. Everywhere was chaos. Terrified citizens fled in all directions; several were trampled in the panic. When the dust settled, Hans Roth could see the extent of the devastation: a 100-metre-wide crater had replaced a statue of Lenin, and the walls of two nearby buildings had collapsed. The search for more bombs started immediately. Roth was part of a group sent to scour the Ukrainian National Museum.

In a small room in the basement, they heard an ominous ticking. The sound was coming through the wall, and for 30 nerve-wracking minutes, the Germans tried to reach the bomb. Then they were ordered to evacuate the building.

That evening, the museum was rocked by an explosion, and similar blasts were heard elsewhere in the city. Kiev's night sky was illuminated by the many fires ignited by the explosives. The next day, a bomb at the Grand Hotel killed a group of senior German officers as well as many civilians. Stalin's booby traps didn't differentiate between Germans and Soviet citizens.

#### **NOTHING WAS TO FALL INTO ENEMY HANDS**

Kiev became a victim of the systematic destruction that was Stalin's response to the German invasion on 22nd June. A stream of orders was issued from the Soviet leader's

*The Soviet military dagger was used both for practical tasks and close combat.*



office. Among them was a directive on 24th June establishing a Council for Evacuation. It was to have a decisive influence on the outcome of the war on the Eastern Front. The Council was tasked with moving 2,500 factories and 20 million people to safety, east of Moscow. Hitler was hoping for a speedy German victory, but Stalin expected a lengthy showdown, where the availability of resources would determine the outcome. He had already written off the entire western part of the Soviet Union, now it was time to move as many of the Soviets' production facilities as possible before they fell into Nazi hands.

Three days later, the Council was ready with a directive for the movement of people: "Professional workers, engineers, clerks employed in the plants being evacuated, military-age youngsters, senior civil servants, and party functionaries."

The decree also determined what should be done with any resources that couldn't be moved: "All valuable property, raw material and supplies that cannot be moved and that the enemy could make use of must be destroyed, liquidated and burned."

The directive marked the beginning of the Soviets' scorched-earth policy, aimed at slowing the German advance. Nowhere was harder hit than Kiev. Even before the enemy marched in and planted the swastika flag in the city, a power plant, four bridges across the Dnieper River, a huge food store, a cannery and the city's water tower were all blown up. Large quantities of flour, sugar, salt and medicine were poured into the river.

### NO ROOM FOR COWARDS

Throughout the 1930s, Stalin had driven millions of people into forced labour to build his communist industrial paradise, and collectivised agriculture had condemned millions more to starvation. In his show of strength against Hitler, he was willing to pile more hardship upon his citizens' shoulders. The Soviet leader announced his intentions in a radio address on 3rd July:

"Comrades! Citizens! Brothers and sisters! Men of our army and navy! I'm addressing you, my friends," he began jovially, after which he explained how he intended to turn lives upside down: "There must be no room for whimperers and cowards, for panic-mongers and deserters." Everyone had to submit to the war effort, for the battle was "our patriotic war of liberation, our war against the Fascist enslavers".

As German forces advanced, Stalin instructed that "all rolling stock must be evacuated, the enemy must not be left a single engine, a single railway car, nor a single pound of grain or gallon of fuel". Farmers must "drive off all their cattle and turn over their grain...for transportation to the rear".

Neither children nor the elderly were mentioned. Nor did Stalin discuss how Soviet citizens behind German lines would survive when food was taken or destroyed. To make matters worse, the Soviet Council for Evacuation prevented people from deciding their own fate. Unauthorised movement was prohibited and only citizens of value to the regime could hope to obtain a coveted travel permit. Thus, the Soviet scorched-earth policy

was set in motion, devoid of the official solidarity of communism and characterised by last-minute planning.

### PARTY BOSSES LEFT

The Soviet regime envisaged an orderly evacuation from the areas under threat near the front. Workers would systematically dismantle machinery at their factories and load it on to trains that would transport both people and equipment to destinations far to the east. Behind them, "destruction battalions" would blow up anything of

## Some Soviet citizens preferred Hitler to Stalin

In many places, the German soldiers were seen as liberators. Ethnic minorities, Christians and anti-communists hated the regime in Moscow.

The news of the German invasion sent thousands of people fleeing east – far away from the advancing armoured divisions – but others stayed put, eagerly awaiting the enemy's arrival.

"Whatever the Germans are like," Lydia Osipova wrote in Leningrad on 23rd June, "they won't be worse than what we have." She and her husband abhorred Stalin, and were by no means the only ones.

The Baltic countries had been swallowed up by the Soviet Union in 1940, and here people celebrated Hitler's invasion. The day after Operation Barbarossa began, rebels occupied the radio building in Kaunas and declared Lithuania independent. In Latvia, crowds waved flags and cheered as German troops marched into the capital, Riga, on 1st July.

Stalin was especially despised in Ukraine, where his politics had triggered a famine in 1932–33. More than four million people had died as the regime's food requisitioning took crops from starving peasants. The German soldiers' arrival was a day of celebration.

But enthusiasm for the Germans diminished as it became clear that they had not come as liberators of the oppressed, but as new occupiers. The soldiers had merely replaced one brutal dictator with another.



On their way east, German soldiers were often offered refreshments by friendly locals.





*Soviet soldiers examining a collection of captured German weapons.*

value that remained and set fire to crops in the fields – with selfless help from the local population. The reality, however, was rather different.

The destruction battalions consisted of party activists supplemented by conscripts and criminals. They carried out their duties without regard to the local people – for example, in Ukraine, 216,000 tonnes of grain went up in flames.

Often, they acted completely indiscriminately. In the industrial town of Zaporizhia, for instance, Stalin's battalions were responsible for two major human tragedies. The town's bakery was blown up without warning, before the last workers had left the site and while citizens still queued outside to buy bread. About 300 people perished.

The city was also hit by a huge tidal wave when a dam on the Dnieper River was destroyed to stop power generation in the area. The water swept all of southern Zaporizhia away, including its inhabitants.

Frequently, factory managers, party officials and soldiers who were helping to organise the evacuations were the first to flee the area – in many cases, with pockets full of stolen goods.

In early August, a report on the chaotic conditions in the Shpolianskii district near the Soviet southern front began: "The evacuation has turned into disorderly flight as a result of a loss of leadership over the population by district organisations. The director of the mill and the head of the fire brigade took flight first.... Many collective- and state-farm chairmen have also taken flight, seizing collective and state resources."

At the same time, many of the "evacuees" were left to make their own way from the threatened areas. When worker Tamara Kokoshkina was suddenly told to leave her rubber-sole factory in Kalinin, outside Moscow, everything happened so quickly that she couldn't reach her designated truck east. Instead, she had to walk along the main road towards the capital, carrying her

young son and holding her daughter's hand. Tamara was far from the only one. Large crowds gathered their most essential belongings and fled east, away from the roar of the guns. In the words of the Polish-born author Aleksander Wat, "all of Russia was on the move".

### SOVIETS KNUCKLED DOWN FOR THEIR COUNTRY

The massive evacuation of workers and machinery allowed the Soviet Union to mass-produce munitions away from Hitler's reach. In Saratov, on the Volga River, workers started manufacturing MiG fighter aircraft even as the factory was still being built around them. The first aircraft left the assembly lines just two weeks after the final parts of the factory were unloaded from trains.

By playing the nationalist card, Stalin succeeded in getting large swathes of the population to support what the regime called the Great Patriotic War. Many citizens worked day and night to keep the forces on the fronts supplied. As far away as Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, the people felt deeply involved in the fight against the Germans, despite being thousands of kilometres from the front.

About 90 factories were moved to the area, where locals worked side by side with evacuees, producing everything from fighter jets to Katyusha rocket-launcher batteries and uniforms for the Red Army.

At one factory, nine-year-old Oleg Boldyrev helped make bombs, mines and grenades. He had begged his father to be allowed to help his country and join in with the war effort.

The mobilisation of Soviet industry proved crucial. Thanks to the steady supply of new weapons, the war was not over in six weeks, as Hitler had hoped. Hans Roth and his comrades had to fight on the Eastern Front for another four years. During that time, millions of German soldiers died, including Hans Roth, who fell in combat in Belarus in 1944.

### The Soviet

security service, NKVD, was in charge of forces at the Soviet border when Germany invaded in 1941. The forces were organised into rifle and cavalry regiments.



# Factories moved to the east

On Stalin's orders, factories in the western part of the Soviet Union were dismantled and sent by rail to the east. By the end of 1941, more than ten million people and 2,500 factories had been moved, and the first planes and tanks rolled off the assembly lines even before factory walls had been rebuilt.

## Luftwaffe fell behind

The German Air Force had a strong lead before the start of the war, but the Blitzkriegs and Battle of Britain cost it dearly. Factories struggled to replace the many aircraft that were lost.



Heinkel bombers supported German armoured divisions.

## Aircraft production reached its peak

As the final showdown approached, both sides produced the same high numbers of aircraft.

## Raw materials were running out

From 1943, the Germans prioritised the production of more powerful tanks rather than increasing numbers, and in the final year of the war, only a few were made.

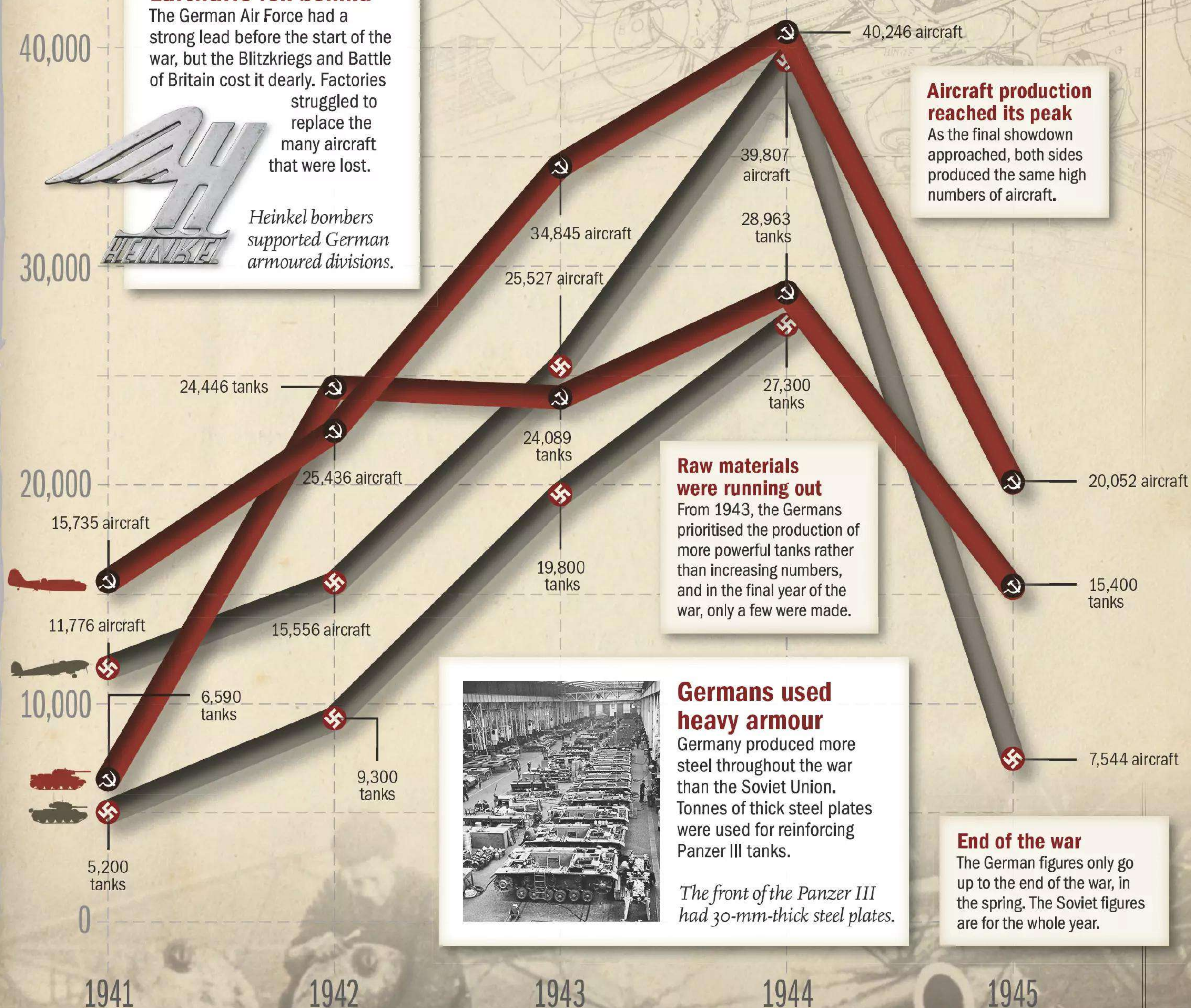
## Germans used heavy armour

Germany produced more steel throughout the war than the Soviet Union. Tonnes of thick steel plates were used for reinforcing Panzer III tanks.

*The front of the Panzer III had 30-mm-thick steel plates.*


## End of the war

The German figures only go up to the end of the war, in the spring. The Soviet figures are for the whole year.



In 1942, the Soviets built over twice as many tanks as the Germans.






**MYSTERY:** \*\*WHY DIDN'T STALIN LISTEN TO  
WARNINGS ABOUT A GERMAN INVASION?\*\*



1941

22<sup>ND</sup> JUNE



A historical photograph showing a German tank, likely a Tiger I, crossing a river. The tank is dark-colored with a skull and crossbones emblem on its side. The number '10' is visible on the front. The background shows a river and a forested bank.

*A tank from the SS division  
Das Reich crosses a river  
during Hitler's invasion of the  
Soviet Union in 1941.*

•  OPERATION BARBAROSSA  •

# SOVIET DICTATOR TURNS A BLIND EYE

Joseph Stalin is in shock, and the Red Army are totally unprepared when German troops roll into the Soviet Union in the early morning of 22nd June, 1941. Despite warnings from agents, border guards and officers of an imminent Nazi attack, the Soviet dictator has chosen to ignore all information about Hitler's invasion plans.



Moscow, 1939–1941

## THE STAGE IS SET



In August 1939 Germany and the Soviet Union sign a non-aggression pact, which will see greater cooperation between the great powers. However, the Kremlin receives information about a planned German attack on the Soviet Union. But Stalin refuses to heed the warnings and does nothing to prepare for an invasion.



IT TOOK THREE MINUTES BEFORE JOSEPH STALIN reached the phone, but for General Georgy Zhukov the wait felt like an eternity. When the Soviet dictator finally took the receiver, words tumbled from the general's mouth. German planes were bombing the Soviet Union on a broad front, he said. Cities were on fire, including Sevastopol, the large and important naval port on the Crimean peninsula. The general asked permission to launch an immediate counterattack. Zhukov's breathless vocal stream was answered with silence. The officer could only hear the sound of Stalin's breathing, which was ominously heavy and deep. "Did you understand me?" asked Zhukov nervously. "Comrade Stalin?" the general urged when he still did not get a response. Finally Stalin spoke, but the Soviet leader gave no answer to Zhukov's request. Instead the short-tempered dictator ordered the Politburo and the military leaders to set up an urgent meeting.

When the meeting began an hour later – at 05.45, 22nd June, 1941 – Stalin's speech was

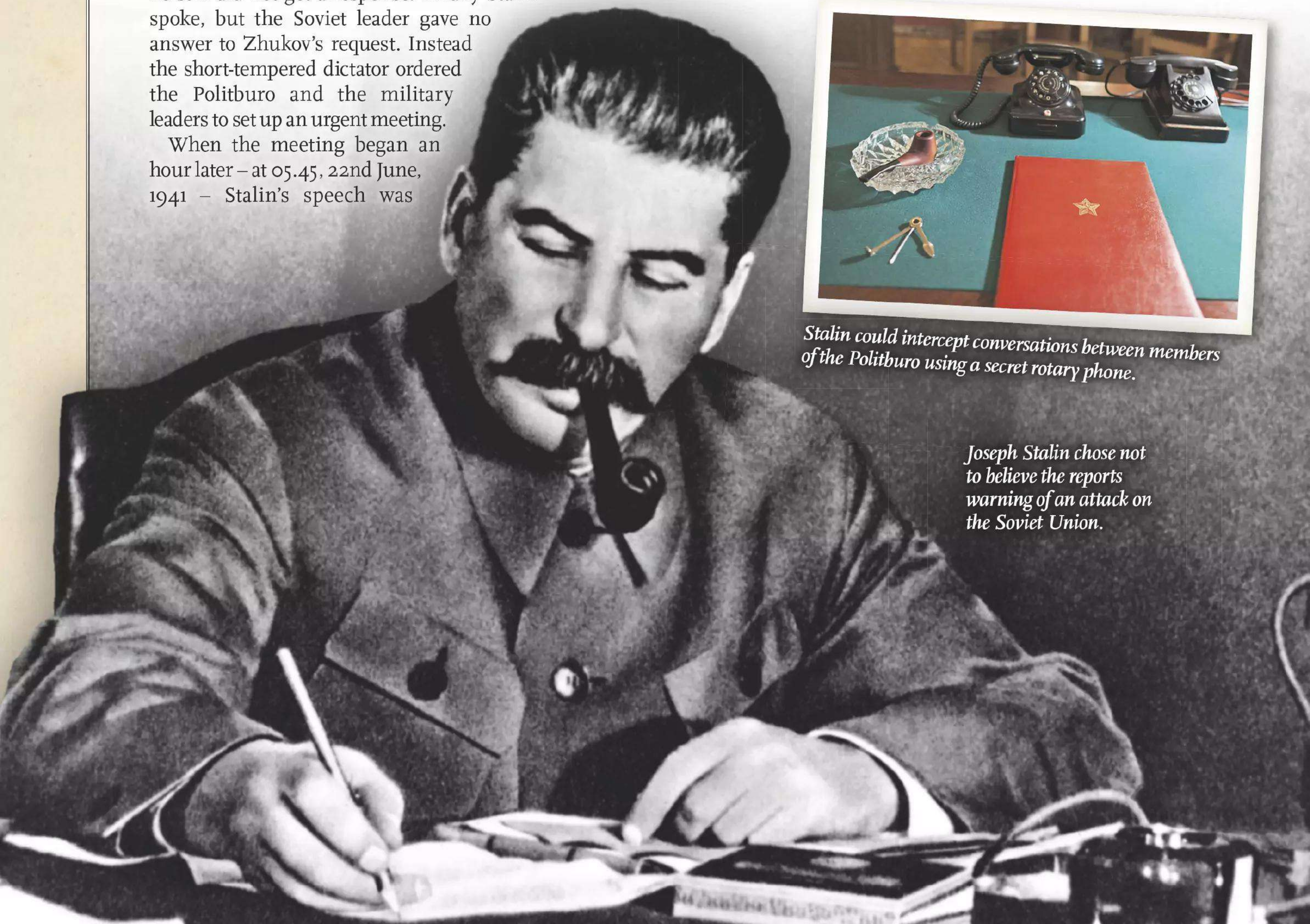
incomprehensible. Pale and disoriented the Soviet leader sat at a green felt table while he fiddled with his pipe in his hand, muttering incoherently.

Stalin's shocked state was understandable, because Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union was overwhelming and devastating. Within a few hours 98 German divisions had crossed the border over a 1,200-kilometre front from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Carpathian Mountains in the south. Bombers spread death and destruction to cities and military installations from Leningrad to Izmail in Ukraine. The Red Army's air force was particularly badly hit. Several thousand planes were destroyed before the aircraft could take flight. The attack should have come as no surprise, however. Military



*Stalin could intercept conversations between members of the Politburo using a secret rotary phone.*

*Joseph Stalin chose not to believe the reports warning of an attack on the Soviet Union.*





leaders, agents, soldiers, railway workers and border guards had time and again provided solid evidence that a German invasion was coming. Stalin, however, chose to ignore all warnings – perhaps because two years earlier, the Soviet leader had bound himself to an alliance with Nazi Germany's dictator Adolf Hitler.

### STALIN BEFRIENDED HITLER UNDER DURESS

The Soviet leader's relationship with Hitler was, however, strained from the beginning. The Führer had never concealed his ambition of annexing Soviet territory to Nazi Germany. The idea that areas in the east could be included as "Lebensraum" for the German population, while delivering oil, grain and other useful resources to the Third Reich, was at the core of Nazi ideology. Stalin knew what the Nazis wanted, but until the late 1930s the Soviet leader saw no evidence that Hitler would follow through on his threat for the foreseeable future.

At the same time the Soviet dictator was busy with other projects. The country was technologically and militarily backward when Stalin took power after Lenin's death in 1924, and he'd launched an ambitious, large-scale industrialisation programme. Money from the export of agricultural products was used to build factories, and the arms industry was a particular area of growth.

In 1938, however, it became difficult for the Soviet Union to ignore Nazi Germany's expansionist aspirations. First Hitler annexed Austria, then Sudetenland and the year after the rest of Czechoslovakia. The western European powers did nothing to prevent the expansion. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain spoke rather excitedly about "peace for our time". Stalin quickly realised that the Russians would stand alone when the Germans decided to invade the Soviet Union. The dictator chose to make the best of Hitler's aspirations for conquest, and on 23rd August, 1939 the Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov signed a non-aggression pact with his German counterpart, Joachim von Ribbentrop.

The pact committed the countries to neutrality in case of conflict with third countries and also included an additional secret protocol that divided Eastern Europe into two chunks, one Nazi Germany, the other Soviet. Stalin claimed Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Bessarabia and eastern Poland, while its western part was German. On 1st September, 1939 Hitler's forces attacked Poland from the west, and a few weeks later Stalin's troops – in full accordance with the non-aggression pact – invaded the country from the east.

### SOVIET UNION GOT EARLY WARNINGS

The Soviet Union possessed an extensive network of spies and agents and a source in Bulgaria came forward with some ominous news. At the beginning of June 1940 Hitler was close to defeating France, and according to the source, the Nazi dictator was already plotting the next step in his quest for European domination.

According to the source, a report written by Ivan Proskurov, the head of Soviet military intelligence, said that the Germans "aspired to conclude an armistice with France. Italy would then threaten France militarily, and peace would result. After a peace agreement, Germany would put its army in order, to make the army ready and together with Italy

## GERMAN-SOVIET ALLIANCE

### STALIN JOINS FORCES WITH HITLER

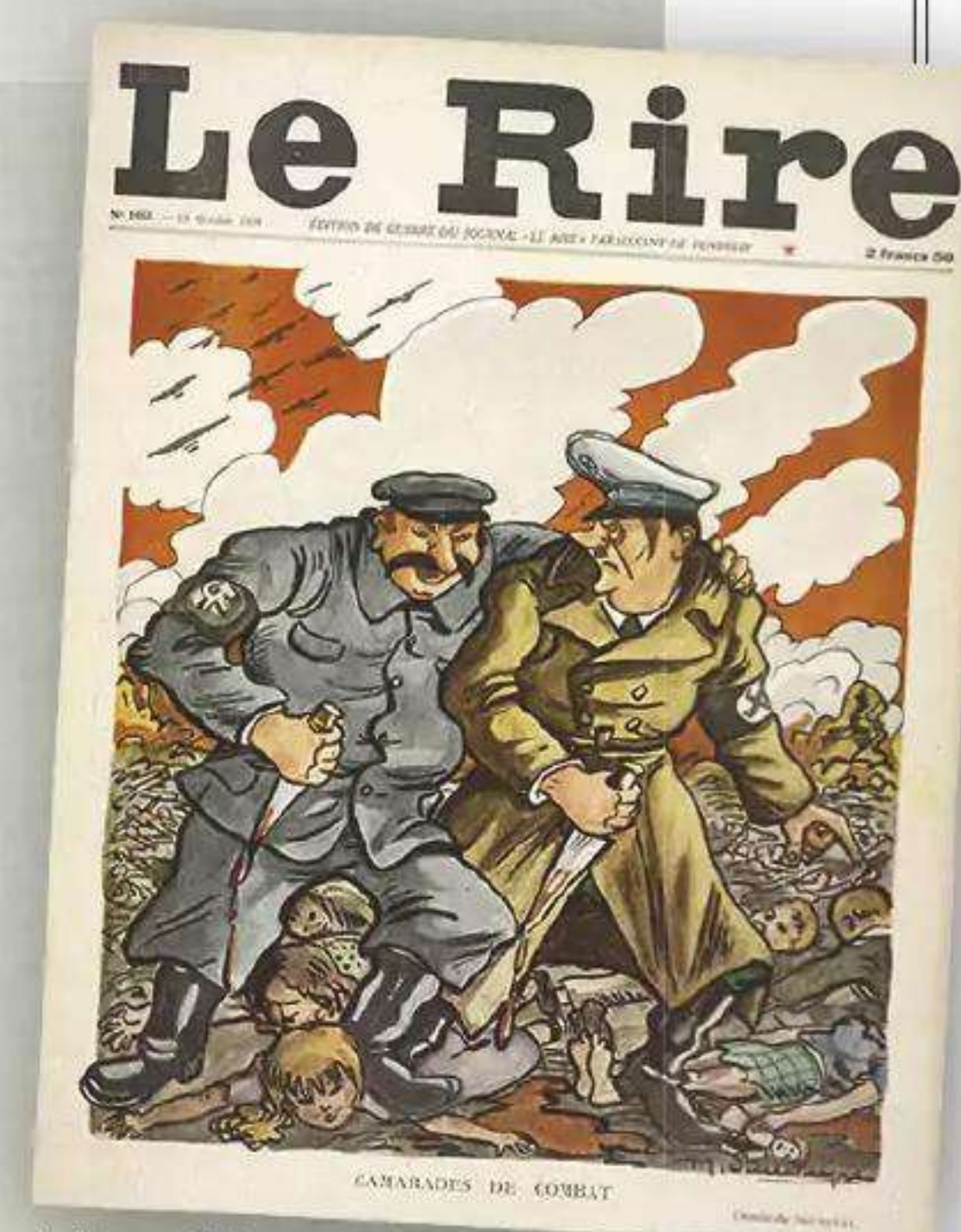
## 1939

#### 23RD AUGUST:

Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov signs a non-aggression pact with his German counterpart, Joachim von Ribbentrop. The ministers also sign a secret protocol that, among other things, divides Poland between both countries.

#### 1ST SEPTEMBER:

Germany invades Poland in line with the secret protocol. The Soviet Union attacks Poland on 17th September.



*The alliance between made the front page of the magazine Le Rire.*

## 1940

#### 11TH FEBRUARY:

The Soviet Union and Germany sign a trade agreement that gives the Third Reich the opportunity to purchase oil and other raw materials from the Soviet Union. A British blockade has limited German imports of commodities.

#### JUNE-AUGUST:

The Soviet Union occupies the Baltic states and Bessarabia in accordance with the secret protocol.

#### 12TH-15TH NOVEMBER:

Molotov visits Berlin to negotiate a military alliance with Germany and the other two Axis powers, Japan and Italy. The plans however, make no difference.

## 1941

#### 10TH JANUARY:

The Soviet Union and Germany sign a common border and trade deal. The agreement gives the Germans expanded access to raw materials. Six months later the Third Reich attacks the Soviet Union during Operation Barbarossa.



*Soviet villages went up in flames in their hundreds during Operation Barbarossa in 1941.*



and Japan make a sudden attack on the USSR". Four days after the Bulgarian source had reported to Proskurov, the Italians attacked France. On 22nd June, the French signed an armistice with Germany and two days later signed with Italy. About a month later Hitler met with German generals at the Berghof where the Führer stated that "the Soviet Union had to be addressed" and outlined plans for an invasion.

#### SOVIET LEADER HOPED FOR ATTRITION

Proskurov's report was sent to Stalin, but the Soviet dictator's reaction to the information was never known. The warning

## Soviet leader's paranoia weakened the Red Army

In the mid-1930s, the Soviet Union's army was a modern and well-equipped force, but Stalin purged officers and let equipment deteriorate.

The quality of the Soviet military plummeted in the late 1930s, when Stalin was gripped by fear of a military coup and therefore executed and deported thousands of officers. The purges particularly hit senior officers where, for example, three out of five marshals were removed from their posts. Stalin's anger went beyond removing the most foresighted officers; at the same time affecting both the quality and production rates of weapons and equipment. The consequences included failing to concentrate on developing new weapons such as tactical combat aircraft. When Hitler and Stalin signed the non-aggression pact in 1939, about 80 percent of the Soviet Union's tanks and the majority of its aircraft were outdated and incapable of defending the homeland.

was only one of many. During the following year one revelation after another documenting the Germans' plans were exposed. From Switzerland the Hungarian agent Alexander Rado announced on 21st February, 1941 that "Germany has 150 divisions in the east... the German offensive will begin at the end of May". Yet neither Stalin nor the Soviet generals felt any reason to sound the alarm. The spy Richard Sorge, who had sources in the highest of German circles, repeatedly warned that German divisions were heading east from France, but the information was ignored.

An intelligence report from Prague on 17th April announced that: "Senior German officers stationed in Czechoslovakia have told friends that German divisions are concentrating on the western borders of the USSR. It is believed that Hitler will attack the USSR in the second half of June". Stalin exploded on hearing this: "English provocation!" he wrote angrily in red ink in the report's margin.

The choice of words was revealing. Stalin refused to believe that Hitler would attack the Soviet Union before he had defeated Britain. The presumption was not totally wrong, because Hitler had originally planned a landing on the English coast – Operation Sea Lion – in 1940, but since RAF resistance had proved too strong, the Führer postponed his invasion plans indefinitely. Developments during the Battle of Britain negated all Stalin's previous beliefs. When the Soviet dictator signed the non-aggression pact, he'd hoped to launch Germany and capitalist Western Europe into a long and exhausting war that would prepare the entire continent for communism and Soviet domination. Stalin did not respond to the new strategic situation – he refused to accept that Hitler had changed plans and that the situation had become far less favourable for the Soviet Union.

#### AGENTS FEARED DICTATOR

Stalin was not the only one to deny reality, because many of the agents' reports on the postponement of Operation Sea

*Most of Stalin's tanks were obsolete when World War II broke out.*





An additional secret protocol was added to the non-aggression pact that divided Eastern Europe into German and Soviet areas of interest.



Joachim von Ribbentrop

Joseph Stalin

Vjatjeslav Molotov

Hitler wasn't present when the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed the non-aggression pact in Moscow in 1939, but Stalin entered the room as the countries' two foreign ministers – Vyacheslav Molotov and Joachim von Ribbentrop – added their signatures.

Lion never reached the Kremlin. The reason was fear. Employees at the SVR, the Soviet Union's Intelligence Service, stated after the Cold War that the service suffered heavy losses because of so-called "oppression". This description covered extremely cruel conditions, because Stalin wouldn't stand for any opposition. Agents or intelligence officials who said anything against the Soviet leader were arrested and tortured. Many intelligence officers were shot or banished to the dreaded labour camps of the Gulag.

In 1938, Stalin liquidated almost all spies who did not have a solid cover – for example in connection with an embassy. The remaining agents dared not speak to Stalin. One exception was Ivan Proskurov, who from the beginning had warned Stalin of Hitler's future plans. The intelligence chief's career was unsurprisingly short – in July 1940 Proskurov was replaced with a more malleable candidate.

## RAILROAD WORKERS TALKED OF INVASION

Warnings didn't simply emanate from spies and agents. Employees of the First (Railroad) Department, a public authority charged with improving the efficiency of the railway network, reported suspicious activities from the German side of the border. For example, a report from July 1940 stated that an unusually large number of locomotives in Poland were devoted to pulling wagons filled with cement and iron. The materials could be used to build military installations that could be useful as a springboard for an attack in the east.

Later that summer, employees at the department reported an even more suspicious cargo. "In the past several days

German tank units have been unloading at the Sedlets station, after which they move in the direction of the Soviet frontier", it said on 20th July. In December, the department announced that the Germans had built five airfields near Warsaw. Fuel tanks that could hold up to 50,000 litres were buried under 30 centimetres of earth.

The border troops – a unit that guarded the western Soviet border from the Barents Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south – also observed signs of an impending invasion. From the beginning of 1941 agents from the

**IVAN PROSKUROV**

NAME

TITLE

HEAD OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

**Spy chief warned of attacks**

Ivan Proskurov's career took off while he was an officer in the Red Army Air Force. During a meeting on flight development in 1938 the air force officer spoke his mind before Stalin had a chance to speak. Even though this behaviour was unheard of, the Soviet leader appointed Proskurov Head of Military Intelligence (RU) in 1939. As the new head of intelligence, Proskurov warned Stalin about the forthcoming German attack.

- Was dismissed in 1940.
- Received death sentence in 1941.

1907-1941



*Communist symbols – the hammer and sickle in a star – graced Soviet officers' belts.*

German military intelligence service, the Abwehr, flocked across the border. Agents came from the operation bases in Königsberg, Warsaw and Kraków, and their behaviour was suspicious.

A report on 8th January, 1941 revealed that agents had orders to “bring samples of oil, motor vehicles and aviation gasoline, and lubricants to Germany”. Spies caught in the Ukraine and Belarus willingly told that they had been asked to “acquire samples of the fuels and lubricants, in use in Soviet industry and transport facilities”, and the samples should be “large enough to permit analysis”. Some of the agents also had Soviet currency – all clear signs that the spies were sent to test whether Soviet fuel could be used in German vehicles when the invasion began. The State Security officer who received the report saw no need to do anything drastic. “We must clarify the reason for these tasks”, he noted guardedly in the margin.

Not even direct observations of tanks, military trucks and even guns a few kilometres from the border gave rise to any action from the Kremlin. When a soldier in an outpost at Przemyśl in present-day Poland saw a cable for a field telephone system poking up from the banks of the River San bordering on German territory, the officer concluded that the cable must run from the German to the Soviet side.

### HITLER CONVINCED RIVAL IN LETTERS

Although Stalin was an effective manipulator on home territory, he never became a worldly man. And Hitler exploited the fact that the Soviet leader had never been abroad and possessed very little experience of foreign policy. Historians have found letters in Russian archives from the Nazi dictator to Stalin. In the correspondence, which several experts believe is genuine, Hitler assured Stalin that he still planned an assault on Britain. The Führer swore that troop movements towards the east were because the Germans wanted to protect weapons and soldiers against possible British bombardment. “The approximately 70 divisions would be deployed along the German side of the Polish border in order to



*Stalin later executed several of the politicians who surrounded the Soviet leader here at the 1st May parade.*



*German officers meet with  
soldiers of a Soviet tank  
unit in Poland 29th  
September, 1939.*





*The Germans met more resistance as the attack on the Soviet Union dragged on.*

protect them from British bombers and intelligence services", Hitler wrote on 31st December, 1940.

The Führer had started a giant double play with his Soviet counterpart. At the same time as Nazi Germany was preparing an invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler sent a letter to Stalin on 14th May, 1941. In the letter the Führer mentioned the risk of a random German general attacking the Soviet Union on his own. So Hitler urged the Soviet leader to ignore any German action that could be mistaken as preparation for an attack on the Soviet Union.

The letter apparently reinforced Stalin's scepticism about warnings of German preparations for an invasion. Just one month after Ribbentrop and Molotov signed the non-aggression pact in September 1939 German planes started to fly over Soviet territory. The Soviet leader saw them as reconnaissance flights, even though the planes concentrated on military installations that the Red Army had set up in its western regions.

Stalin still believed that Hitler was determined to conquer Britain, and only after that would he launch an attack on the Soviet Union. Perhaps Germans and Britons would even manage to tire each other out in a war of attrition, then the Soviet leader could invade Europe and impose communism on the Europeans. In any case, Stalin believed that the Russians had plenty of time to prepare for a German attack.

When Soviet fighters forced down a German plane on 15th April, 1941, Russian officers found a camera, some rolls of exposed film and a torn topographic map of the Soviet Union. Stalin still did nothing. And even when the Luftwaffe's machines landed on Soviet airfields, so crews could get out and look at the facilities, the dictator didn't react. On the contrary, Stalin had given soldiers strict orders not to fire on the German aircraft.

"Do not open fire. Limit yourselves to preparing a report", said the order on 29th March, 1940. "We do not direct fire from antiaircraft artillery on German aircraft in peacetime", it added. Not even news that German bombers had crossed the border on 20th June, 1941 provoked action.

### STALIN WENT INTO SHOCK

For everyone other than Stalin, it became clear that the Germans would attack the Soviet Union. Staff fled from foreign embassies with packed suitcases. A report from an agent in Paris on 21st June announced that the Wehrmacht had completed the relocation of troops to the Soviet border and would attack the Soviet Union the following day. "This information is a British provocation. Find out who the author is and punish him", noted Stalin on the paper. Then the Soviet leader went to bed and slept until early the next morning when he was awakened by Zhukov.

Betrayal and defeat struck Stalin like a slap in the face. "Hitler simply does not know about it", said the scared Soviet leader, as he sat at the green table with his closest advisers in the dawn hours on 22nd June, 1941. The dictator, who was otherwise known for his almost



morbid suspicion, had believed blindly in the German Führer only to have been cheated.

The shock overwhelmed Stalin who, in his depressed state sought refuge in his dacha. "Lenin left us a grand legacy, and we, his followers, flushed that legacy down the toilet", whimpered the Soviet leader when on 30th June he was visited by councillors, who asked him to return to work.

Four days later, Stalin had regained his composure enough to speak to the people. Now Zhukov and the rest of the nation heard a voice without hesitation. "Comrade, citizens, brothers and sisters, men of our Army and Navy! My words are addressed to you, dear friends!" the dictator thundered. "All

our forces for the support of our heroic Red Army and our glorious Red Navy! All the forces of the people for the destruction of the enemy! Forward to victory!"

The gloves had been thrown down. Stalin was finally ready to put the country's formidable strength of soldiers, workers and resources into a fight against Hitler's war machine.

#### **POSSIBLE REASON FOR THE MYSTERY**

Stalin was probably convinced that Hitler would occupy Britain before the Wehrmacht attacked the Soviet Union. His advisors failed to persuade him otherwise, probably due to fear of invoking the dictator's wrath.

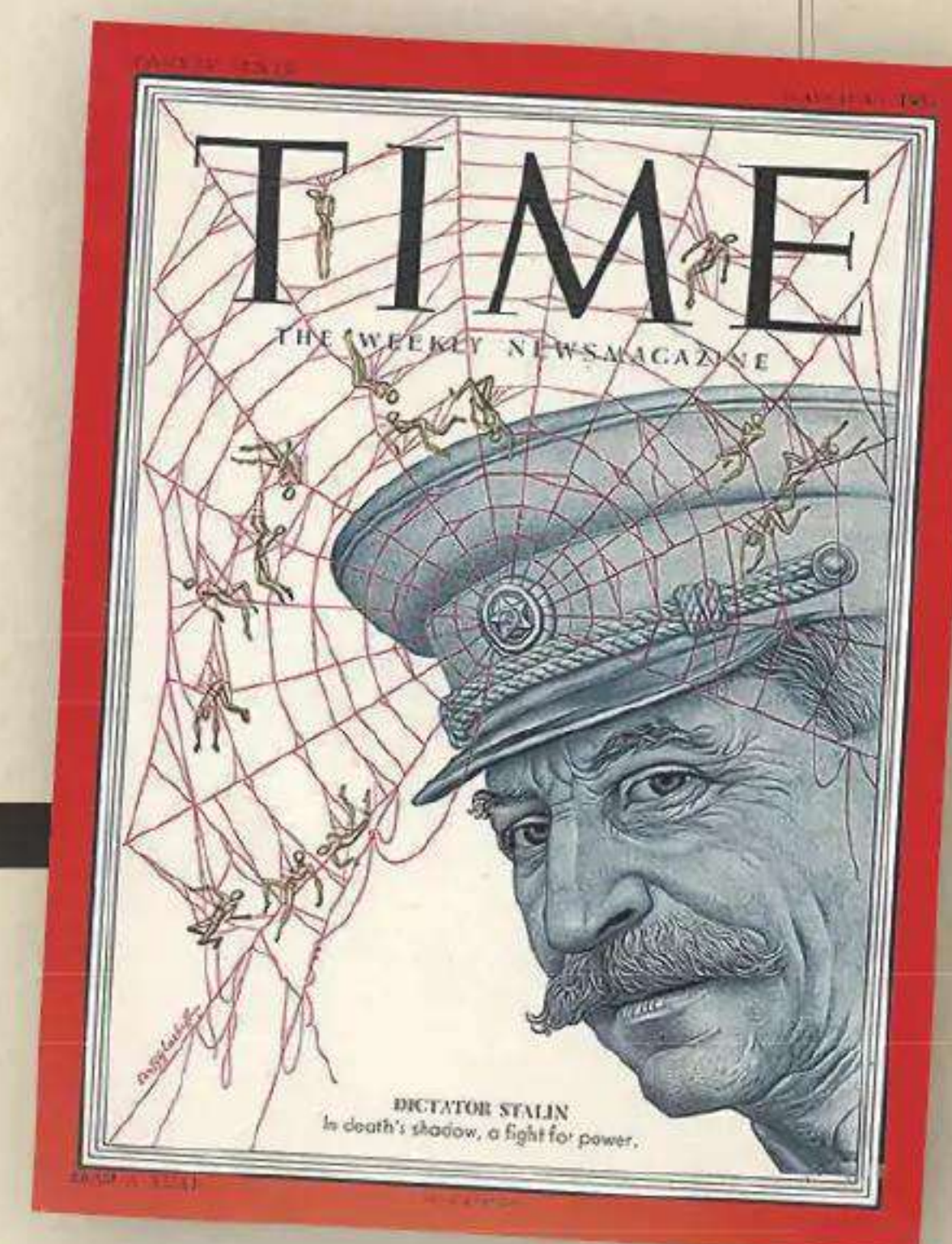
#### **PERSPECTIVE**

## Stalin's reign of terror continued after the war

In May 1945, the Soviet leader was one of the war's major victors, but success did not soften the Stalin regime. On the contrary, as the dictator became more and more paranoid, so eventually no one in the Kremlin was safe from terror.

In the years after World War II Stalin suffered more and more from paranoia, and the dictator's subordinates lived in constant fear of being executed or sent to labour camps. In 1953, Stalin arrested a group of Kremlin doctors who were suspected of planning to kill a number of senior politicians. In reality, the doctors were persecuted because they were Jews – a demographic that the Soviet leader

accused of being agents for the intelligence services in the United States. The Jews were then persecuted and executed in both the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Stalin's death probably prevented even worse atrocities. In 2011 doctor's notes revealed that for many years the dictator had suffered from severe atherosclerosis in the brain, a condition that can aggravate paranoia.



Many newspapers and magazines placed news of Stalin's death on their front covers in March 1953.



Stalin's death ended the worst period of terror in Soviet history.



*Temperatures fell to minus 40  
degrees in the bombed-out city  
during the first winter of  
Leningrad's siege.*

1941 8<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER





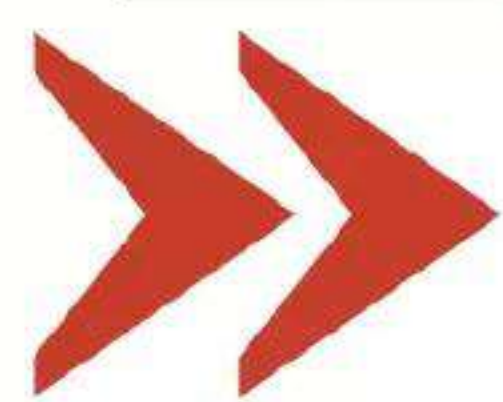
• 🪙 • 900 DAYS OF HORROR • 🪙 •

# GERMAN RING OF STEEL CHOKES LENINGRAD

In the autumn of 1941, the German ring of steel closes around Leningrad, trapping the residents inside the city. Hitler forbids his generals from taking Leningrad – instead, its 3.5 million citizens must starve to death, thereby allowing German settlers to move into the empty metropolis. A merciless battle against cold and hunger begins.



## THE STAGE IS SET



In 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union sign a non-aggression pact, but Hitler breaks the treaty two years later, ordering his mighty army to march across the Soviet border. With Operation Barbarossa, he plans to wipe out the country's population, leaving a vast fertile land to be repopulated by German settlers.



**T**HE YOUNG JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR PAVEL Luknitsky glanced out of the window and shaded his eyes against the bright sunlight. Summer finally seemed to have arrived in Leningrad. Luknitsky returned to his desk in Tolstoy's old villa, which was now used as a writers' retreat.

The arrival of the sunshine was timely, because Luknitsky had just delivered his new novel, *Nisso*, to his publisher, and was wondering how to spend his free time. Although his novel was about love, Luknitsky's work tended to revolve around Russia's magnificent natural world, so he was tempted to travel to the Karelian Isthmus, north-west of Leningrad, with the Writers Union.

The area was now under Soviet rule, following the Winter War against Finland in 1939–1940, and the beautiful region offered ample opportunity for swimming and hiking.

It was 21st June 1941, and although Luknitsky was worried about the war's progress in Europe, he was sure that the Germans would leave Leningrad and the rest of the Soviet empire alone. He strolled through the beautiful city streets filled with summertime youth – young men in suits, girls in white dresses. The cafes along the city's main street, Nevsky Prospekt, were packed with smiling faces, and in the evening people danced the foxtrot at Hotel Europa. The smell of lilac filled the air and love was blooming. All seemed calm.

The illusion was shattered the next morning. At 11.45, Luknitsky was listening to the radio when he heard Foreign Minister Molotov's voice: "Men and

women, citizens of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Government and its head, Comrade Stalin, have instructed me to make the following announcement: at 04.00, without declaration of war and without any claims being made on the Soviet Union, German troops attacked our country, attacked our frontier in many places, and bombed from the air Zhitomir, Kiev, Sevastopol, Kaunas and other cities."

Luknitsky was horrified, but refused to be scared. While rumours circulated and tens of thousands of women and children gathered, ready to be evacuated from the city, he still went as planned to Karelia for a summer break.

## CITIZENS FLED IN PANIC

Twenty days later, Luknitsky returned to a city in chaos. At Leningrad's railway stations, hordes of people were trying to board trains, while the city's streets and parks had been dug up and transformed into anti-tank trenches and shelters. About 80 of Luknitsky's fellow writers had joined the volunteer forces – others were trying to leave.

"Like rats leaving a sinking ship," Luknitsky noted with annoyance in his diary.

On 25th August, he made his way to the apartment of the poet Anna Akhmatova. She was known as 'the muse of tears', and was very feminine and sensitive, and highly respected as a poet. Akhmatova lay ill in bed, but she told Luknitsky she had been asked to talk on the radio.

A few days later, as nervousness in the city grew further, Luknitsky heard Akhmatova try to instil courage in the people of Leningrad by reminding them of the city's proud heritage:

"My dear fellow citizens, mothers, wives and sisters of Leningrad. For months, the Germans have sought to take

*These hand grenades – with explosives in a tin at the top – were used by German soldiers in both World War I and World War II.*

**"It will be hard – but we will hold out"**

Communist Party's rallying cry in the city's newspaper, *Leningradskaya Pravda*.



prisoner the city of Peter, the city of Lenin, the city of Pushkin, of Dostoyevsky and Blok, the city of great culture and great achievement.”

Leningrad (now known as St Petersburg) not only had great political and symbolic significance as the country’s second-largest city, but as a centre of Soviet industry, it also had enormous strategic importance. It housed 520 factories with 780,000 workers, producing the majority of the turbines used in Soviet aircraft and ships, as well as large quantities of clothing and shoes, and a wide range of precision-engineered products that weren’t only important in peacetime, but also essential in war. There was no doubt: the Germans were on their way to Leningrad, and panic erupted throughout the city. Rumours circulated of how the Germans had already destroyed London with a rain of bombs.

### FIRST SHELLS HIT THE CITY

It was cloudy and foggy on 4th September, and all evening Luknitsky could hear the roar of artillery to the south. The noise seemed to be drawing closer, and shortly after midnight, the first long-range German shells struck the city. They hit the Vitebsk freight terminal and a number of factories on the outskirts of the city.

News of the bombing spread like wildfire. Luknitsky heard that the Germans had swept the Soviet

divisions aside and broken through the city’s outer defences. The small town of Mga had apparently been lost – a serious blow, because its station was a hub for all trains out of Leningrad. There were around three million people left in the city, but only enough shelter for a third of them. A few days after the first bombardment, Luknitsky went to visit a female acquaintance. The evening was beautiful and clear, but suddenly alarms sounded in the streets, and shortly after, bombs fell on the railway station, a few hundred metres from Luknitsky. Thousands of terrified people poured on to the streets, while numerous fires sent long plumes of smoke over the city.

Slowly it dawned on Luknitsky and his fellow citizens that Leningrad was under siege and on the brink of annihilation.

In the city newspaper, *Leningradskaya Pravda*, Luknitsky read the Communist Party’s rallying cry: “We will be cold – but we will survive; we will be hungry – but we will tighten our belts; it will be hard – but we will hold out; we will hold out – until we win.”

Meanwhile, German bombers roared over the city. The first major wave of attack arrived on 8th September at 19.00, when 27 aircraft dropped 6,300 incendiary bombs. At midnight, another wave of planes dropped even more explosives.

After the air raid, Anna Akhmatova’s voice disappeared from the radio. Luknitsky visited her in September and found her sick and weak. She told him how her nerves were frayed by the “dragon’s shriek” of the falling bombs, and how she’d had to take refuge in a basement, whose walls trembled under the blasts of the bombs. A few days after their meeting, Akhmatova was evacuated from the city in one of the last aircraft to leave. Luknitsky felt even more alone.

Autumn arrived and the Germans continued their

1902-1973

**PAVEL LUKNITSKY**

NAME

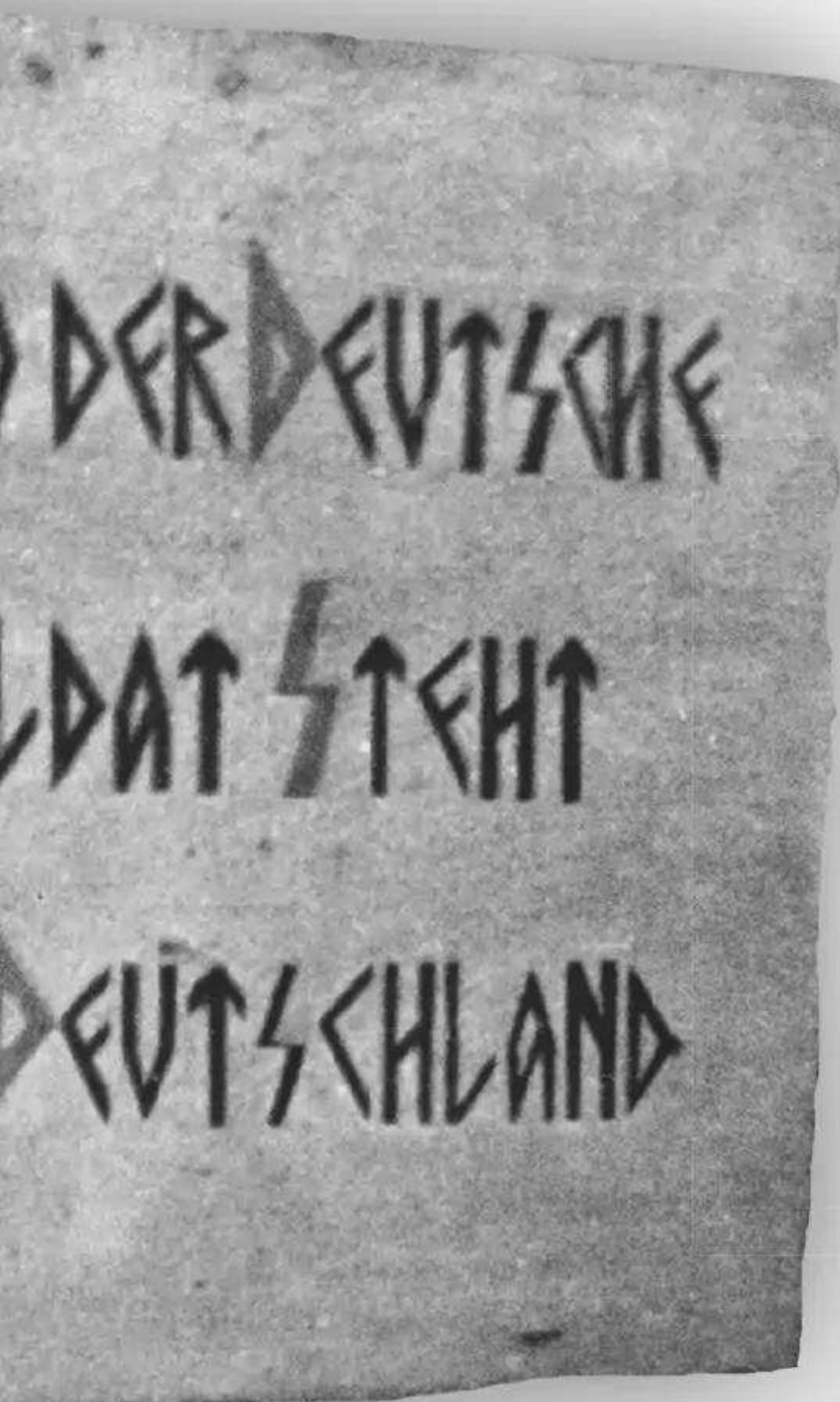
TITLE AUTHOR

**Eyewitness described horrors of the city**

Pavel Luknitsky stayed in the besieged city, where 3,000 people died every day from hunger and cold. In January 1942, he became a war correspondent in the Red Army’s 54th Army, and managed to escape the city. In April 1944, he was present when Soviet troops liberated Leningrad.

➤ Journalist at the Tass news agency.

➤ War correspondent in the Red Army.



*The German sentry and the sign outside Leningrad signified that Germany now extended all the way to the front line.*





# Offensive halted outside the city

Hitler stopped the German offensive a few kilometres from Leningrad. Capturing the city quickly would mean that Germany would have to provide for millions of Soviets, and Hitler didn't want that. He therefore planned a different fate for the 3.5 million residents.

## Finns stood to the north



In 1941, Finland recaptured large parts of the Karelian Isthmus, which it had lost to the Soviets during the Winter War. Finnish troops stood **about 20 km north of Leningrad**, but they didn't participate in the bombing of the city.

## Bombs devastated the city



From mid-September 1941, the **Germans regularly bombed Leningrad**, from aircraft and with artillery. The bombs killed nearly 6,000 Russians, and more than 20,000 were wounded. Aircraft from the Soviets' Baltic Fleet retaliated by bombing German positions.

## Hitler choked city

### All city's residents to die of hunger

The Germans quickly reached the outskirts of Leningrad, where Hitler halted the offensive. He wanted to besiege the city so the residents would starve to death. The empty city could then be populated by German settlers.



The invasion of the Soviet Union cost the Luftwaffe around 60 percent of its aircraft.





## City became a fortress

### 190 km of barricades built in record time

In the early summer of 1941, one million of Leningrad's citizens were mobilised to fortify the city. Using wood, barbed wire, soil and concrete, they built 190 km of fortified walls and anti-tank trenches to protect the city from attacks from the north and south.



Leningrad's inhabitants blocked the city's streets with barricades of wood, rubble and stone.

## Lake Ladoga stayed open

The Germans reached the **southern shore of Lake Ladoga**, but most of the lake remained outside German control. In winter, routes over the ice took refugees out of the city and carried food and fuel to the besieged.

● KIRISHI

TIKHOVIN

## Germans dug in

The invaders dug a continuous line of **trenches south of the city**, enabling German artillery to cut off all supply lines to Leningrad and deny the besieged citizens the opportunity to escape. The only way in or out of the city was over Lake Ladoga.

German soldiers guarded the besieged city from trenches and dugouts behind damaged tanks.

1,496,000 Soviets were honoured after the war for helping to defend Leningrad.

daily bombardment of the city. On 14th October, the first snow fell, sending the temperature well below freezing.

In his diary, Luknitsky noted: "A dark night. In this room, as in all the others in this house on Shchors Street and almost all the houses in Leningrad, there is frost and unbroken darkness. People with exhausted faces walk slowly – dark shadows on the streets. And more and more coffins, roughly made, are pulled on sleds, by the stumbling, slipping, weak relatives of the dead. Worst of all – the darkness... hunger and cold and darkness...."

## SAWDUST REPLACED FLOUR IN BREAD

The city's food stores only lasted a month. Traders in the square started selling cow and horse hides, so people could make soup. But eventually, even the supply of hides dried up, and people were rationed to just one slice of bread a day.

The desperate hunt for food forced residents to gather potatoes and vegetables from the surrounding fields while being shot at by the Germans. Several shiploads of mouldy grain were salvaged from the bottom of the harbour, where the Germans had sunk cargo ships laden with food.

After a few weeks, all the food had gone. The flour in bread was replaced with sawdust. Residents began boiling shoes, belts and other leather to make soup. If they mixed the soup with glue, they could make brawn. Dipped in mustard and vinegar, it became the main meal for thousands of the city's residents.

The temperature fell to minus 40 degrees. Power plants were closed. People collapsed from exhaustion while queuing for the shops. When Luknitsky visited his family in December, he found his aunt dead. Her body lay on a table in her room and the door was kept shut. No one was available to take her to one of the mass graves established by the authorities.

People were also dying in the city's Writers Union, of which Luknitsky was a member. At the end of December, six members died – one in the society's dining room. The dead man lay there for six days before anyone removed the body.

Winter was at its worst; snow and ice piled up in the streets. Patrols of Young Communists searched apartments, looking for children whose parents had died.

At the end of January, Luknitsky dragged himself, weak and hungry, through snowdrifts from his old apartment, which had been bombed in the autumn. He pulled a small sledge laden with papers and manuscripts that he wanted to save, thinking the same thing as everyone else:

"Will the Germans soon be driven off? Will the blockade soon be lifted?"

On Borovaja Street, he passed a toboggan loaded with corpses, chillingly thin and blue, almost skeletons. And as Luknitsky reached Marat Street, a thin man lay stretched out on the pavement. Dead. Just then, two women emerged from an apartment and saw the man. "My



Lena. Lena!" they cried. A passer-by muttered: "Leonid Abramovich is dead and lying on the pavement."

Further on, Luknitsky met a ragged man carrying his scrawny dog, their eyes full of despair. Luknitsky wondered which would die first. He estimated that about 3,000 people were dying from starvation every day in the once proud city.

It wasn't just small things that became part of the Leningraders' diet during the siege. Every animal, from cows to cats and frogs, was killed. Wallpaper paste and fat from

varnish, Vaseline, glycerine and waste products – it was all eaten. Even clothes were cut into pieces, cooked and consumed. Market traders also sold 'sweet soil', excavated from the basements of the Badaev warehouses, where molten sugar had escaped during the air raids. However, this unappetising food was nothing compared to the mysterious meat that was sometimes sold in side streets.

Robbers and thieves had long enjoyed a free rein, but now it seemed that a far more serious crime was plaguing the city:



*In the summer of 1942, the city's parks were used for farming. The lawn in front of St Isaac's Cathedral was thick with cabbages.*



gangs were selling human flesh to desperate residents. In some neighbourhoods, children had been disappearing, and parents began to keep them off the streets, where no one was safe. Luknitsky watched his city fall apart. Leningrad's streets no longer smelt of petrol, tobacco or soap; instead, the stench of turpentine hung in the air, emanating from the disinfected trucks that drove bodies to the mass graves.

At home, his father had used his faithful dog Mishka to make soup, but despite the exhaustion and hunger, Luknitsky

was still luckier than most of the city's residents. He'd become a writer for the national news agency, Tass, and was regularly sent to the front on the outskirts of the city, where he could benefit from field rations. He repeatedly begged permission to buy extra rations to take home to his desperate comrades.

#### **BUSES AND TRUCKS DROVE OVER ICE**

On 20th January, Luknitsky heard plans for a mass evacuation. The escape route went across Lake Ladoga, >>>

# **“Worst of all – the darkness... hunger and cold and darkness”**

From Pavel Luknitsky's diary.

*A horse killed during a bombing raid was immediately dismembered. Nothing edible was wasted, and only a few of the city's animals escaped the cooking pot.*



*The escape route over frozen Lake Ladoga was cold and dangerous. Many perished trying to flee the city.*



east of the city. The lake was frozen, so buses and trucks could reach Soviet-controlled areas further east under cover of darkness. The trail over the ice was called the Road of Life. With great difficulty, Luknitsky managed to get 12 writers on the first transport, due to depart two days later.

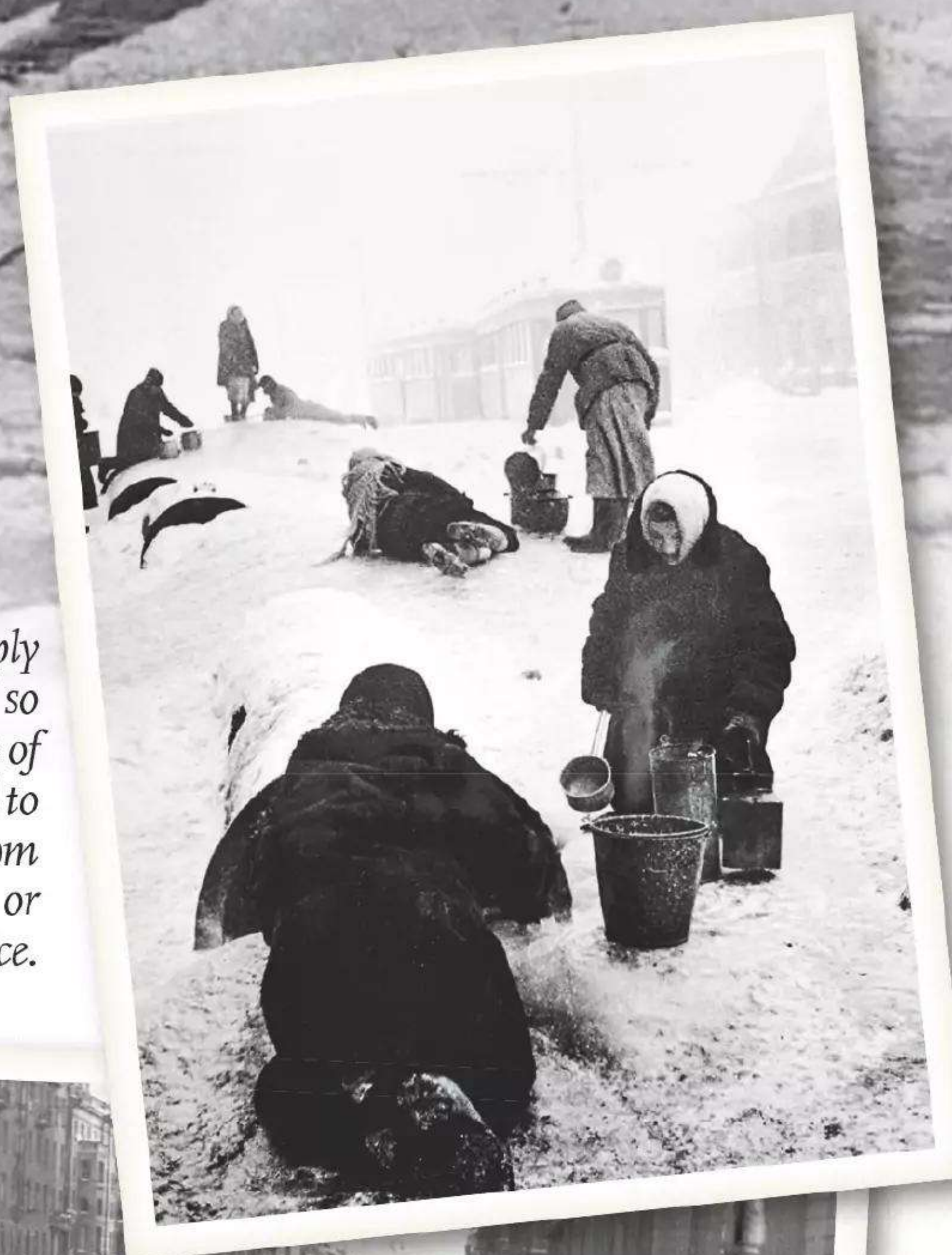
The rescue operation almost killed him. The evening before departure, he had to walk 12 kilometres to pack 20 kilograms of luggage for a female colleague who had fallen ill. He'd only managed to get two and a half hours of sleep before he pulled her and her luggage on a toboggan to the evacuation site. After many hours of waiting, the bus finally left. By that point, several of the passengers could barely move. Luknitsky let out a sigh of relief as he watched the bus disappear.

The day after the rescue operation, he developed a high fever. A friend had to drag him to the city's military airport; Luknitsky was almost lifeless by the time they got there. He got a bed, a big glass of vodka and a meal. After three days, Luknitsky was back on his feet. His comrades had arranged for him to join the 54th Army as a war correspondent.

Here they hoped he would be able to get more to eat and regain his strength. He accepted the offer, and in late January, he was told to help with the evacuation of civilians across Lake Ladoga. Luknitsky climbed aboard the truck to find 14 frozen people sitting there, more dead than alive.

The truck drove through Leningrad's snowy streets, across the Okhta Bridge, and on to the lake. They passed burned-out

*The water supply was cut off, so the people of Leningrad had to fetch water from beneath the ice, or melt snow and ice.*



*Children's toboggans were used to take the dead away. Bodies were often left for days because no one was available to move them.*

**“People with exhausted faces walk slowly – dark shadows on the streets”**

*From Pavel Luknitsky's diary.*



cars and trucks filled with refugees huddled together, their faces speckled with frost. Only the faint hope of crossing the lake kept them alive. The road between the ruined houses was narrow, but that evening they finally reached the shore, which was defended by anti-aircraft guns built into blocks of ice.

The driver turned off the truck's headlights, and for the next few hours, they rumbled over the ice at full speed, snow stretching endlessly before them. The risk of being shelled by the Germans was high. Three hours later, they reached Zhikharevo and felt a little safer. Luknitsky expected to find warmth, food and rest in the city, but it was in chaos.

Thousands of hungry people wandered about aimlessly through ramshackle camps. There was no water, no beds, no doctors. Nothing. Luknitsky was able to provide some food for the refugees on the truck, but during the night a three-year-old girl died, followed by an engineer a few hours later. The next morning, the small group left by train for the east, and Luknitsky could continue his journey to the 54th Army.

### PARKS BECAME KITCHEN GARDENS

After a few months with the army, Luknitsky returned to Leningrad having regained his strength. Spring was on its way and the food situation in the besieged city had improved slightly. Over winter, trucks had transported food across Lake Ladoga and parks had been transformed into cabbage fields, while potato plants sprouted between anti-aircraft batteries.

That summer and autumn, the city's residents got some much-needed respite and hope began to spread, but a second cold winter of besiegement arrived all too soon. The German forces were weakening, however, and in December, the Soviet Army decided to embark upon Operation Iskra to end the siege. On 12th January 1943, more than 4,500 Soviet guns opened fire on the Germans, and shortly after, thousands of Soviet soldiers stormed the German lines.

In the days that followed, the Germans retreated, and after a fresh burst of fighting on 19th January, the Red Army was able to punch a small hole in the Germans' ring of steel. It was still only a narrow gap, but Leningrad celebrated the victory with red flags and dancing in the streets. A few days later, Luknitsky witnessed the arrival of the first train in many months. It had braved German artillery fire to reach Leningrad over makeshift bridges.

The train was proof that the city was heading towards better times. It was welcomed by solemn hurrahs, and the mayor gave a speech. The narrow passage to Soviet-controlled territory became known as the Corridor of Death, because of its dangers, but nonetheless, supplies got through and rations were shared.

During spring, tinned butter, preserved meat and powdered milk from the US arrived, and although supplies were insufficient and people continued to die, most of the population began to regain their strength. Leningrad was surviving. It took another winter, however, before the city was finally liberated.

# Death toll kept secret

Soviet leaders didn't dare disclose the number of deaths for fear of weakening morale, but accurate figures were difficult to determine in any case.

As the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, they pushed a stream of refugees eastward. Hundreds of thousands of unregistered refugees stayed in Leningrad. This is one reason why the authorities found it difficult to determine the number of deaths.

**THE OFFICIAL FIGURES** After the war, the Soviet authorities set the casualty toll for those killed during the siege at

**670,000**

**THE TRUE CASUALTIES** Historians agree that the official death toll is too low – they estimate the true figure to be

between **700,000** and **1,500,000** deaths in total.

The uncertainty is due in part to the number of records that were destroyed in the war and because many of the refugees weren't officially recorded. Most historians today estimate the figure to be

between **1,100,000** and **1,300,000** civilian victims.

**HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS FLED** Some residents, especially women and children, were evacuated in 1942. A total of

**1,400,000** escaped.

*Leningrad's nightmare ended on 27th January 1944, when the Red Army finally liberated the city.*





• • BATTLE OF MOSCOW • •

# THE BLITZKRIEG FREEZES

Hitler's troops launch their assault on Moscow. Everything points towards a magnificent victory as the Kremlin's spires appear in the advance force's sights. But the icy winter has set in, and as the temperature plunges, Stalin deploys his reserves into the battle on the Eastern Front.

1941  
2<sup>ND</sup> OCTOBER





*The Russian winter proved a tough ordeal for both German soldiers and their equipment.*



## THE STAGE IS SET



Since June, Germany's Panzer divisions have raced towards the Russian steppes. Vast areas have been taken and millions of Soviet soldiers captured. Drunk on success, Hitler imagines that the final victory is near. Next, he plans the ultimate humiliation of the Soviet Union: the capture of Moscow.



**T**HE NIGHT OF 2ND OCTOBER 1941 was calm on the ridge over the Desna River. Artillery Lieutenant Georg Richter's position gave him a vantage point overlooking no-man's land down to the river and

across to the Red Army positions on the opposite bank. The day before, he'd counted eight enemy bunkers.

"I believe the attack will start the next day; in my opinion it will be the last big operation this year," he wrote in his diary.

Richter was correct on both counts. At 04.40 the next morning, no fewer than 20 batteries shattered the silence, raining shells down over the Soviet positions. The bombardment was swiftly followed by a familiar whining sound, indicating the arrival of a swarm of Stuka dive bombers. The planes dropped in a steep vertical dive before unloading their bombs on their targets at the last possible minute. Meanwhile, rocket launchers left trails of white smoke behind their deadly payloads. Before long, a new sound was added to the noisy inferno: the engine roar of hundreds of German tanks and trucks carrying infantry, all heading towards the Soviet positions.

"It ought to be all over before winter," Richter added that night. The officer had no doubts he was witnessing the start of the final act that would lead to the death of the Soviet Union.

### DESTINATION MOSCOW

Hitler's campaign against Communism was just three months old, marked by an impressive list of victories that had seen panzer troops swoop at lightning speed to occupy the major cities of Bialystok, Minsk and Smolensk en route to the Soviet capital. Leningrad had been cut off from the outside by Army Group North, and in Kiev, Army Group South had captured over 600,000 Soviet soldiers in history's largest *kesselschlacht* (encirclement). One more shock would be enough to collapse the Red Army, the German High Command decreed, and Moscow was the obvious target for that final offensive.

Stalin's state apparatus had long been preparing for such an attack. Since mid-July, 200,000 citizens – many of them women – had been conscripted to dig trenches, construct anti-tank traps and build hundreds of bunkers in a line one hundred kilometres west of Moscow. The fortified belt stretched 170 km from north to south and constituted a line to fall back to if the Germans advanced that far. But the work was

far from complete when the German offensive against Moscow, codenamed Operation Typhoon, began. Only half the Red Army forces on the front ahead of Moscow managed to reach the line at all – many had been caught unawares

when General Guderian – dubbed *Schneller Heinz* (Fast Heinz) by his admiring troops – began his advance on 30th September.

The rest of Army Group Centre attacked two days later.

The offensive repeated the campaign's first days back in June, when Panzer divisions sliced through Stalin's border defences and rolled into the Soviet

hinterland, putting German soldiers in euphoric mood.

This time, Army Group Centre achieved the first of its objectives in just six days. Three Soviet armies were cut off at the industrial city of Bryansk, while another four were surrounded near the town of Vyazma to the north.

### STALIN'S FRONT COLLAPSED

All order and coordination quickly collapsed, and many thought only of escape. Among them was Private Boris Oreshkin, who on 10th October, wandered blindly through the woods of Vyazma all night, and he was not alone. After a night under constant fire, Oreshkin and his comrades surrendered.

"I was never more exhausted in my life than I was there", he recalled later. "We were conveyed to a village by a single soldier. He was walking ahead of us and didn't even think it was necessary to hold the gun in his hands. He was sure that we would do nothing to him and this fact finally broke me down, humiliated me and showed me the whole hopelessness of our situation."

Despite this, Oreshkin was one of the lucky ones. He survived both the battle and captivity at the hands of the

**"It ought to be all over before winter"**

Artillery Lieutenant Georg Richter in his diary



# The storming of Moscow begins

The operation begins with one of Germany's greatest victories: seven Soviet armies are defeated. But a lack of fuel and bad weather halts the offensive.

0 200 400 600 800 1,000 km

## 1 3rd Panzer Army splits

The 3rd Panzer Army's strength is divided along two axes: one moves quickly towards Moscow on a northerly route; the other heads to attack Vyazma.

## 2 4th Panzers go three ways

The 4th Panzer Army breaks through Soviet lines. Some units continue to Moscow, while the others turn north to join the other German forces on the road to Vyazma. The Soviet forces are slow to react to the German attack, and four of its armies are surrounded near Vyazma.

## 3 Russians get caught out

From the south, part of the 2nd Panzer Army heads for Bryansk, while the rest carry on north-east towards Tula.

## 4 Soviets lose seven armies

The Soviets also fail to escape Bryansk. Three armies are surrounded and wiped out. In all, the Russians have now lost seven armies.

## 5 Offensive halted

The Red Army's 26th Army puts up fierce resistance at Tula. Fuel shortages force the German advance to a halt.

## 6 Bad weather slows Germans

Various Soviet forces fail to hold on to Borodino and Borovsk. But the weather comes to the Red Army's aid. Rain turns the roads into mud, slowing the German troops and delaying their advance.

ROSLAVL

2nd Panzer Army

*The infantry advanced faster than the tanks after rain turned Russian roads into a quagmire.*

WEHRMACHT Army Group Centre	
SOLDIERS:	1,929,000
TANKS:	1,000
AIRCRAFT:	1,390
ARTILLERY:	14,000

THE RED ARMY Soviet Western, Reserve and Bryansk Fronts	
SOLDIERS:	1,250,000
TANKS:	990
AIRCRAFT:	863
ARTILLERY:	34,700



## MOSCOW CAMPAIGN

## GERMANS' SLOW MARCH COST THEM VICTORY

**30th September** The German Army Group Centre has three armoured and three infantry armies ready along a 500-kilometre line. The Red Army has 15 armies, but only half the strength because it's not yet mobilised enough soldiers.

**2nd October** Germany begins its offensive against Moscow. According to Hitler's plan, it will decide the entire campaign.

**7th October** The first melting snow falls around Bryansk. The roads turn to mud, and the German tanks get bogged down.

**13th October** Frost makes the roads passable once more, and German armies resume their offensive against Moscow.

**27th October** German Panzer Armies attack the Red Army defensive line, leading to a Soviet retreat. But bad weather, fuel shortages and damaged bridges once again delay the German advance on Moscow.

**12th November** The temperature around Moscow drops to minus 12° Celsius, and the Red Army sends forces on skis against German soldiers in front of the city.

**15th November** German assault on Moscow.

**27th November** Germans advance north-west of Moscow and cross the Moscow-Volga Canal. Just two days later, they are pushed back across the canal.

**5th December** The advance stops. Soviet General Zhukov has managed to assemble a superior army. A Soviet counterattack drives the Germans back.

**16th December** Hitler orders his army to dig in and wait for reinforcements from the west. The order is ignored at the front, and German soldiers flee westward.

Germans. Elsewhere, entire Soviet units were led to a bloody end rushing enemy positions.

German Private HE Braun's unit was one of those defending against wave after wave of attack from Soviet soldiers on the night of 11th October. When dawn broke, he thought the Soviets' suicidal rush was over, but he was in for a shock. "Suddenly the dead in the foreground started to move again", Braun recalled later. "A sea of Red Army soldiers" charged the German positions. Many were hit by German bullets, but others stormed through the German lines.

Several Germans were trampled to death, and horses ran in panic in all directions, while trucks crammed with Soviet soldiers raced past Braun's position. The Germans fought for their lives with pistols, hand grenades and even spades until a group of tanks finally came to their rescue.

Around 85,000 Soviet soldiers escaped the Vyazma encirclement, while 23,000 managed to escape Bryansk. Red Army casualties were unimaginable. The official tally totalled 658,279 dead, missing or captured, but the actual losses over the two battles was closer to one million men. Large quantities of materiel were destroyed or fell into German hands.

15-year-old Maria Denisova's village was at the centre of some of the bloodiest battles. When the action died down, she crawled up from the basement under her parents' house to witness a horrific scene: "There were so many dead bodies all



*When the German offensive stalled, the forces were close to their target – but an awfully long way from home.*



over the place,” she recalled. “We had to walk on them since there was no other place to step.”

Denisova lost both her parents in the battle. The survivors had to drink water from the river, even though it ran red with blood.

## STALIN WENT UNDERGROUND

After the disasters at Vyazma and Bryansk, the Soviet leader feared it would be impossible to prevent the German advance on Moscow. On 15th October, he ordered the destruction of 1,000 factories in the capital. At the same time, the seat of government was moved from the Kremlin to Kuibyshev, eight hundred kilometres to the east. At this point, Stalin remained unsure as to whether he should stay or flee too.

The Kremlin had no shelters, so Stalin moved to the air defence’s makeshift headquarters. From here, a lift led directly down to the underlying metro station. Secure from Luftwaffe bombs, Stalin had a special compartment built in a train hidden from the rest of the station behind plywood panelling. Here, the dictator could both work and sleep. Moscow’s darkest hour had arrived.

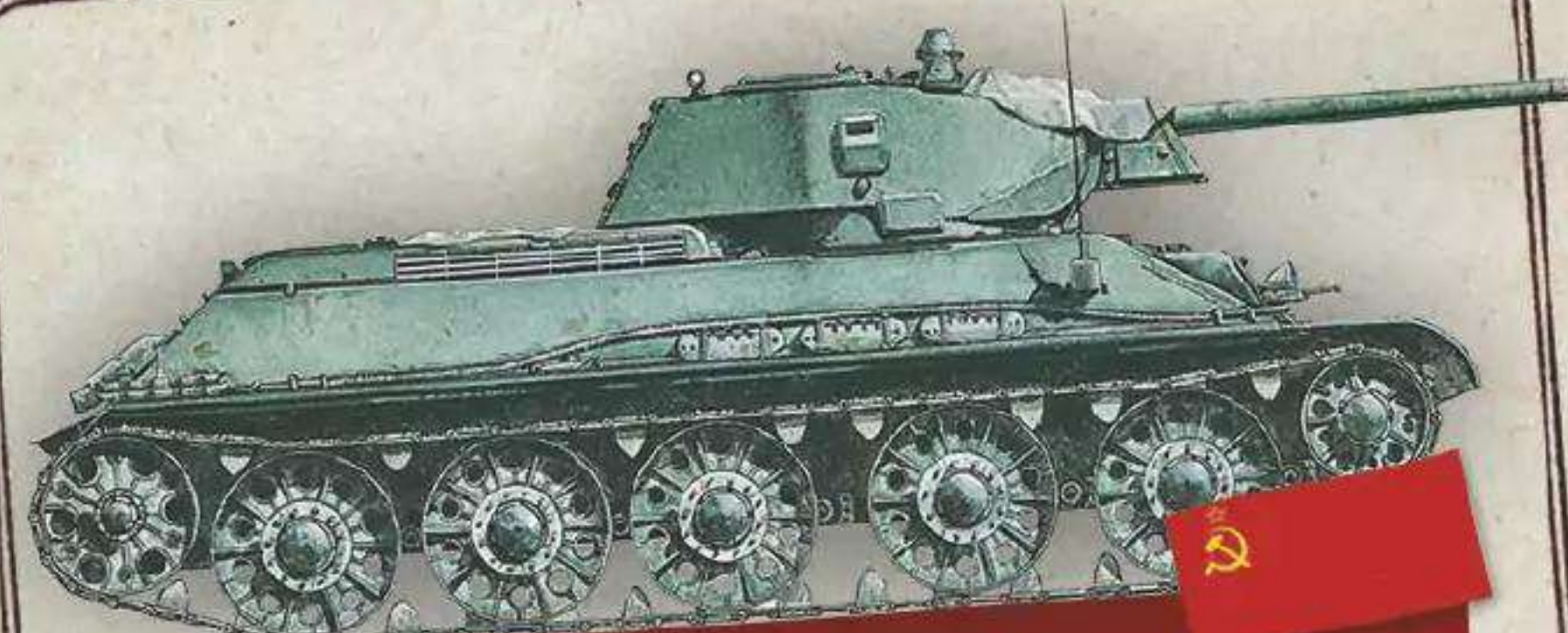
As officials and party members boarded trains to the east, Muscovites quickly realised that their leaders were abandoning them. Many assumed that Stalin had already left, at which point what had been a relatively orderly evacuation descended into chaos. Shops were looted, and Soviet citizens burned their portraits of Stalin and party membership cards en masse. Some did so out of fear of being shot by Germans as they entered the city, while others were happy at the prospect of being rid of Stalin’s oppressive regime. In the streets around government buildings, partially burned papers floated through the air as officials destroyed archived documents.

## OFFENSIVE GROUND TO A HALT

As panic spread in Moscow, German forces heading towards the city ran into difficulties of their own. Rain, sleet and snow made the Russian dirt roads impassable. The army was now paying the price for Hitler’s spring campaign in the Balkans, which had delayed the invasion of the Soviet Union by more than a month.

“We can’t go on. There is no more petrol and nothing is coming up behind us,” wrote one exhausted German soldier. “The snow has melted and worsened the muck. Rations still do not arrive and we sit in filth the entire day.”

In the battle against the mud, German tanks used three times more fuel than planned. The infantry, who for months had lagged far behind the tanks and other motorised vehicles now overtook them. After taking – with some effort – Stalin’s defensive line 100 km from Moscow, the offensive ground to a halt. The swampy terrain and lack of supplies across the entire front made it impossible to continue. At the end of October



### T-34

Tank gun	76.2 mm
Front armour	45 mm
Speed	53 km/h
Weight	26.5 tonnes
Crew	4

#### SOVIET TANK WAS BEST

**Advantages:** the T-34 tank was the world’s best in 1941. It had the most powerful gun and the thickest armour, yet was still the fastest. Wide tracks ensured that it could run just about anywhere.

**Drawbacks:** lack of radio equipment meant that tank crews struggled to coordinate efforts on the battlefield.



### Panzer III

Tank gun	50 mm
Front armour	30 mm
Speed	40 km/h
Weight	23 tons
Crew	5

#### AIR SUPPORT BOOSTED STRENGTH

**Advantages:** the Panzer III had one key plus: space for five crew, with three in the tower. Here, each could focus on his own individual task: gunner, weapon loader and commander.

**Drawbacks:** the tracks got stuck in the mud and it struggled to start in cold temperatures. Often the engine had to be warmed up by lighting a fire under the tank carriage.

Hitler ordered a pause until 15th November to reorganise his forces and wait for the autumn frosts to harden the ground.

Stalin had regained his courage in the meantime – on the afternoon of 19th October, he decided to remain in Moscow.

Army units of all sizes that hadn’t been caught in the traps at Vyazma and Bryansk arrived in the outskirts of Moscow, where they joined up with reserve forces who’d been brought in from the east as well as parts of the front that weren’t so heavily pressed. 440,000 civilian workers were also called up and armed to take their place in defending the Soviet capital.

On the 7th November, to mark the 24th anniversary of the Communist revolution, Stalin ordered a parade to bolster the fighting spirit of both new recruits and Moscow’s remaining citizens. Despite the Luftwaffe’s ever-present threat, he planned to carry out the annual military parade in Red Square in front of the Kremlin. From there the troops would march directly to the front.

The cameras were in place to demonstrate to the whole nation that Stalin hadn’t bolted. From 08.00, column after column marched across the cobblestone square as falling snow settled on their caps and uniforms. They were followed by flag-bearing cavalry and the Red Army’s mighty T-34 tanks.

Recruit Leonid Shevelev had heard the rumours that Stalin had fled. The sight of the dictator at Lenin’s mausoleum was inspirational, giving

the new conscripts the passion to march “with the kind of determination as if we

were nailing down the coffins of the advancing Nazis”. Stalin assured the soldiers that Hitler’s Germany would “collapse under the weight of its own crimes”.

## THE GERMAN TANKS ROLLED ON AGAIN

Eight days after the Red Army parade, Army Group Centre opened the second phase of Operation Typhoon. An attack north-west of Moscow was intended to lead to the city’s encirclement before the winter snow made it impossible

“So many dead bodies”

15-year-old Maria Denisova in an interview





Unlike the Germans, many Soviet soldiers were equipped with warm clothes and snow-white camouflage suits. The Soviets also had better access to supplies and reinforcements than the invaders.

Thick felted wool socks kept the Red Army soldiers' feet warm and dry in their boots.

to move. But it was an exhausted, starving, frozen and lice-infested army that advanced to battle.

Hitler and his generals hadn't expected the war against the Soviet Union to last for long as it had, and had failed to provide proper winter equipment. The Russian winter cold was quick to present serious problems for both personnel and equipment.

Luftwaffe from supporting the ground forces' advance. With temperatures 20 degrees below zero, the Stuka dive bombers had trouble starting. Soviet equipment was far hardier.

"Russian aircraft totally dominate air space," complained an otherwise-confident Richter in his diary on 26th November. Freezing temperatures rendered machine guns unusable, and several units suffered more casualties from frostbite and cold than enemy bullets and grenades. It was only their firm belief that they were fighting the final battle of the campaign that kept German soldiers going.

North-west of Moscow, the Red Army was pushed back step by step. But even though the Wehrmacht retained the initiative, the advance had slowed to a snail's pace. Soviet troops fought where they stood, and when threatened by overwhelming force, had time to calmly retreat to new positions. The panic that had enveloped the Soviet army at Vyazma and Bryansk was no more.

On the evening of 4th December, Army Group Centre forces were exhausted. Less than 20 km from the outskirts of Moscow, the advanced units could clearly see Moscow's domes and spires in the clear frosty air, but Operation Typhoon had finally stalled – literally stuck in the snow and out of fuel.

Meanwhile, the Red Army was preparing its response. General Georgy Zhukov was now commanding the army's Moscow Front and had spent weeks building up huge reserves. Despite mammoth losses, the Red

### SOLDIERS WERE FORCED TO FIGHT IN WOMEN'S CLOTHING

Crawling lice proved a particular nuisance. Poor levels of hygiene also spread dysentery, which could be fatal in the winter cold because the men constantly had to expose themselves because of diarrhoea. According to medical officer Heinrich Happe, "they lost more body warmth than they could afford to lose."

Haape's crude solution was to cut a hole in the seat of the soldiers' trousers, so they could easily relieve themselves.

Lack of warm winter coats and woollen underwear forced German troops to steal any clothes they could from the local civilian population. In some cases, soldiers went into battle wearing several layers of Russian women's clothing. The cold also prevented the



"Fight for Moscow" commanded posters from the Soviet propaganda machine.



Army's troops at the front were now stronger than they'd been at the beginning of Operation Typhoon. Zhukov had over 30 percent more soldiers, twice as much artillery and two-and-a-half times as many tanks as at the beginning of the battle. In contrast, Army Group Centre was unable to replace its personnel and materiel losses.

### GERMANS WERE DRIVEN BACK FROM MOSCOW

One of the spearheads of Zhukov's attack was Lieutenant Pavel Gudz's armoured unit. On the evening of 5th December, he stood in the snow on a riverbank 30 km north-west of the Kremlin. Behind him, a heavy tank rolled into position, its engine noise masked by the scattered fire from guns on both sides of the front.

Peering through his binoculars, Gudz scouted for the best place to target the following morning's attack. He identified an unsuspecting German tank unit, which had spent the night in the nearby village of Nefedyevo. Between remote exchanges of gunfire, Gudz could hear the sound of a harmonica.

His unit attacked at dawn. Before the Germans could respond, eight of their eighteen tanks were on fire. The survivors took cover behind the houses, but it wasn't long before the Germans took flight towards the west – sharply pursued by Gudz's tank and Soviet artillery fire. Gudz won a medal for his efforts – and he was far from an isolated example.

Everywhere along the front, General Zhukov's counterattack caught the Germans unaware. During the first ten days of the counter-offensive, several towns and cities north-west of Moscow returned to Soviet hands. To the south, Guderian's panzer divisions barely escaped being surrounded themselves. The sight of dead German soldiers in their hopelessly inadequate uniforms infused the Red Army's raw recruits with extra courage.

On the banks of the Moskva River, a group of Soviet soldiers found the body of a German who had wrapped a bra around his ears to protect them from the cold. The enemy wasn't exactly living up to its reputation of being an all-conquering elite force.

### WEHRMACHT FLED IN CHAOS AND PANIC

The Soviet counter-offensive in December was devastating for the Germans. It was the first time the Wehrmacht had suffered such a decisive defeat. Many soldiers panicked and fled west. All order broke down and the forces disintegrated.

"But one misses the orderly hand of the High Command," wrote Richter drily, as his unit attempted to flee through the tangle of vehicles and discarded equipment, joining groups of soldiers – large and small – in full retreat.

Hitler's armies didn't realise it, but they would never again come as close to Moscow as they did on the evening of 4th December 1941.

# Disaster loomed ahead

German hopes of a swift victory over the Soviet Union died after the campaign against Moscow failed. Instead, eventual defeat waited.

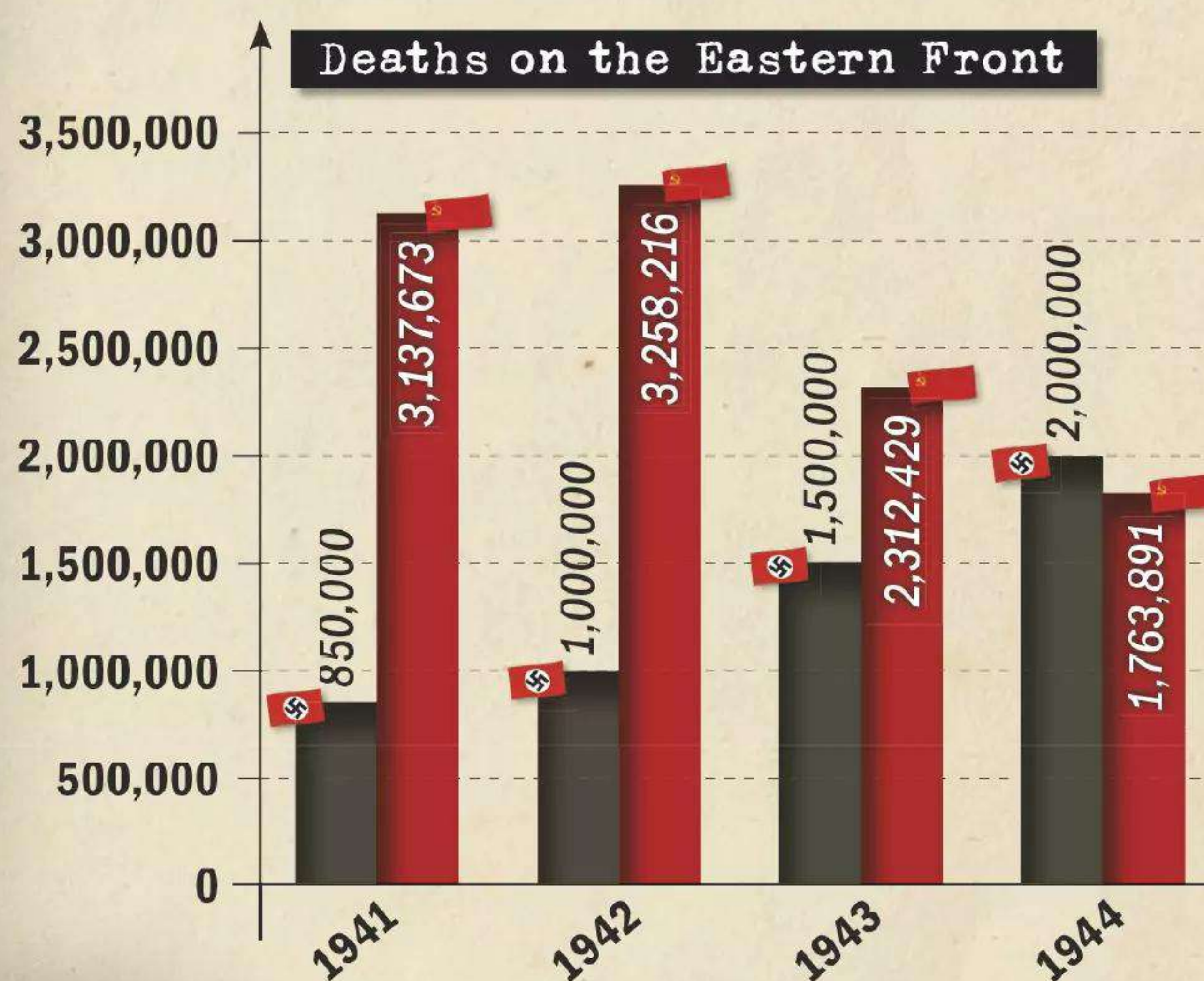
In the winter of 1941-42 the Red Army's counter-offensive turned the German Blitzkrieg into a drawn-out duel. It was a showdown the Wehrmacht was doomed to lose in the face of a Soviet Union with larger reserves of manpower and equipment.

Hitler's final defeat was still some way off in the summer of 1942, when German forces attacked on the southern front. But after further success, a bloody stalemate developed again, this time at Stalingrad.

A Soviet counterattack that winter led to a German army's surrender and the war's turning point. During the summer of 1943 the Germans again tried to take the initiative, but their attack at Kursk ended in complete failure. The German forces' offensive capacity had been exhausted – the initiative was now exclusively with Stalin.



After the winter of 1941, Luftwaffe pilots received fur-lined hats.



The Germans lost troops on the Eastern Front faster than they could be replaced. Instead, the ranks had to be filled with boys.





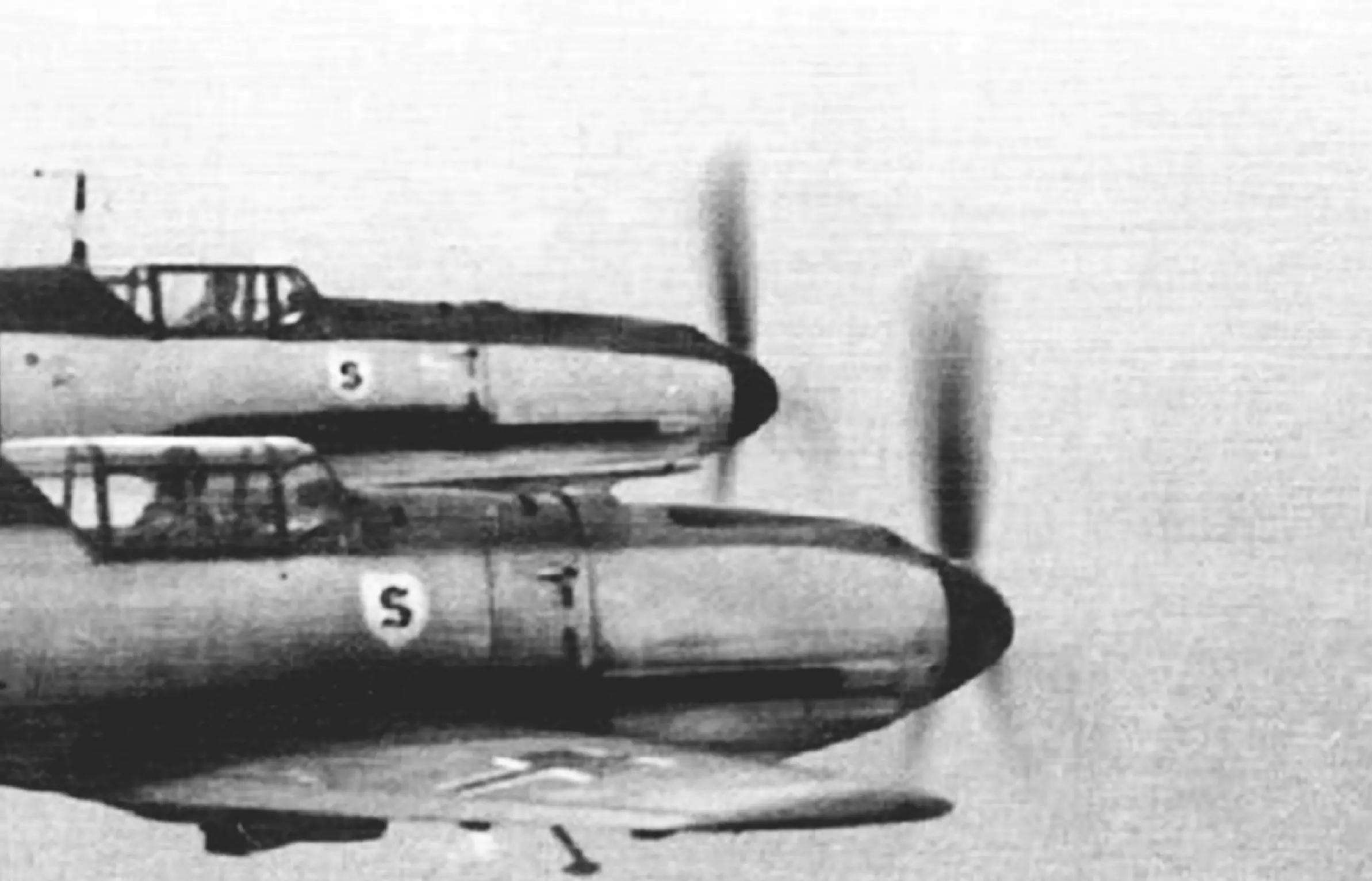


*The Battle of Britain in 1940 was a serious defeat for the Luftwaffe, but Messerschmitt pilots scored victory after victory on the Eastern Front.*

# 1942

10<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER





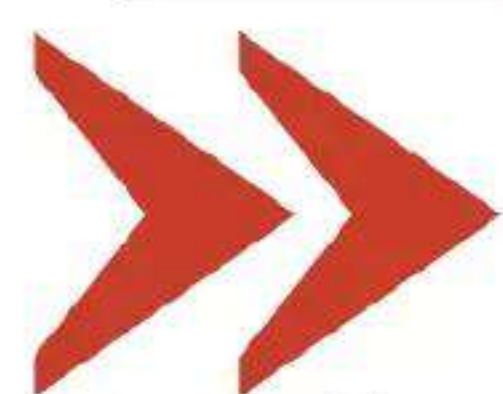
• • LUFTWAFFE • •

# FIGHTER PILOTS SPREAD DEATH IN THE EAST

Jagdgeschwader 52 was the most successful fighter wing in history. With deadly efficiency, the pilots destroyed over 10,000 Soviet aircraft before Stalin could see them off. Even then, it took huge numbers of Soviet aircraft to overcome the Luftwaffe pilots' quality and experience.



THE STAGE IS SET



In all the major battles on the Eastern Front, the Luftwaffe provides crucial air support to the Blitzkrieg's panzer armies. Stalin's inadequate aircraft and poorly trained pilots are no match for Germany's ace flyers, but the Soviets just keep sending men and planes to the front in ever-greater numbers.



ON THE TENTH OF DECEMBER 1942, Jagdgeschwader 52 (JG 52) fighter wing's tally of victories in combat reached 4,000. The current crop of kills were being harvested near Stalingrad, where JG 52 was supporting the 4th Panzer Army's push for the Caucasus oil fields. The tally that day included all the wing's successes since the start of the war.

The count had begun three years earlier when Luftwaffe pilot Paul Gutbrod was conducting a routine patrol flight in his Messerschmitt Bf 109. Suddenly, a Mureaux aircraft appeared on the horizon. The lone French reconnaissance plane was circling a bridge across the Rhine, when Gutbrod banked his Messerschmitt towards it. The French pilot turned the Mureaux west, but he was too



*Jagdgeschwader 52's shield-shaped crest has a sword with wings.*

late: Gutbrod caught the slower machine and destroyed it with a burst of gunfire.

The reconnaissance plane crashed to the ground and Gutbrod returned to a hero's reception at Böblingen air base. The Luftwaffe had won its first victory on the Western Front and Gutbrod was rewarded with an Iron Cross (2nd class).

**EASTERN FRONT OFFERED EASY PREY**

The brief dogfight on 6th September 1939 was JG 52's first victory. Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, the supreme commander of the Luftwaffe, had spent recent years overseeing a vigorous reconstruction of the German air force, and in 1939, JG 52 was one of a total of nine fighter wings, each consisting of well over 100 aircraft and

**“One squadron shot down 93 aircraft in two weeks”**



*JG 52 switched bases over 400 times on the Eastern Front. Fields were quickly transformed into airfields with runways and barracks then abandoned again, often after a few days.*



staffed with well-motivated and highly trained pilots. Although many of the pilots were young, they had already gained combat experience during the Spanish Civil War.

In the first year of WWII, JG 52 operated on the Western Front, taking part in the Battle of Britain, but it had limited success. It was only when, in the summer of 1941, the fighter wing moved east to support Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, that the pilots began to down hundreds of enemy aircraft. The airspace over the Soviet Union became an all-you-can-shoot buffet for the German pilots.

At this point, the Luftwaffe's Messerschmitt fighters were superior to their Soviet counterparts in speed and manoeuvrability, and at the same time, the Soviet pilots had little experience. It was a recipe that couldn't help but result in a platter of success for the Germans, such as the victories they chalked up during May 1942 in the Battle of the Kerch Peninsula. There, one squadron shot down 93 aircraft in two weeks without losing a single plane.

### HARTMANN'S TACTICS WERE BOLD

JG 52 became home to some of the Third Reich's most feared and highly decorated pilots. During World War II, only nine German pilots received the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds. Among them were Hermann Graf and Erich Hartmann. The latter, with 352 victories, became the most successful fighter pilot in history.

Hartmann's tactics were simple but daring: fly close to the target, shoot, then retreat quickly. Often he would only open fire after closing within 20 metres of his target. >>



NAME

**ERICH HARTMANN**

TITLE

PILOT IN JAGDGESCHWADER 52

### Mum taught him to fly

As a young man, Erich Hartmann was taught to fly gliders by his mother, one of Germany's first female glider pilots. In 1939, Hartmann earned his aircraft pilot's licence, and his successful Luftwaffe career began in 1940. After the war, he spent 10 years in Russian captivity.



- > Flew 1,404 sorties; notched up 352 kills.
- > Survived being shot down 14 times.

1922-1993



NAME

**GERHARD BARKHORN**

TITLE

PILOT IN JAGDGESCHWADER 52

### Car accident took the life of flying hero

Gerhard Barkhorn was admitted to the Luftwaffe in 1937 and selected for fighter pilot training at the start of the war. In 1945, Barkhorn was captured by Allied troops, but released soon afterwards. Barkhorn continued his career as a pilot until his retirement in 1975. He was killed in a car crash in 1983.



- > Flew 1,104 trips; notched up 301 kills.
- > Survived being shot down nine times.

1919-1983



NAME

**GÜNTHER RALL**

TITLE

PILOT IN JAGDGESCHWADER 52

### German helped train British pilots

Günther Rall began his military career as an infantry officer in 1936, but was later transferred to the Luftwaffe. By 1938, he was a fighter pilot and a lieutenant. Rall was a prisoner of war in Britain, where he participated in an RAF programme that sought to pass on German pilots' skills. He returned to Germany in 1953.



- > Flew 621 trips; notched up 272 kills.
- > Survived being shot down eight times.

1918-2009





*Luftwaffe fighter pilots sneaked up on their enemies, often striking before their opponent had even recognised the danger. The pilots perceived themselves as hunters stalking prey, and, unlike Soviet pilots, in each case they assessed whether to attack or avoid combat.*

Many of his enemies – who referred to him as the Black Devil – never saw him coming as he pushed his Messerschmitt to the extreme and swooped down on them like a bird of prey.

Skill, daring and cool disdain characterised many of the pilots in the fighter wing that became the most victorious flying unit in the war. Hartmann described one of his encounters with German ace Walter Krupinski, aka The Count, who survived the war with 177 victories.

In the spring of 1943, Krupinski became Hartmann's new commanding officer, and immediately demonstrated how he thought the war should be fought. He crash-landed at the base, then, according to Hartmann, "came in, introduced himself, demanded another plane, went up, was shot down, scored a victory and was brought back by car. He then took another plane, scored two kills, and returned, then wanted dinner. The whole event was treated as casually as a card game."

Even the way he had crash-landed at the base initially was spectacular according to Hartmann who described how Krupinski's Messerschmitt exploded shortly after

landing. Everyone thought they'd seen the last of The Count when he suddenly stepped out of the smoke. His uniform was singed, but he was otherwise unscathed. He simply smiled and complained about the Soviet flak above the Caucasus.

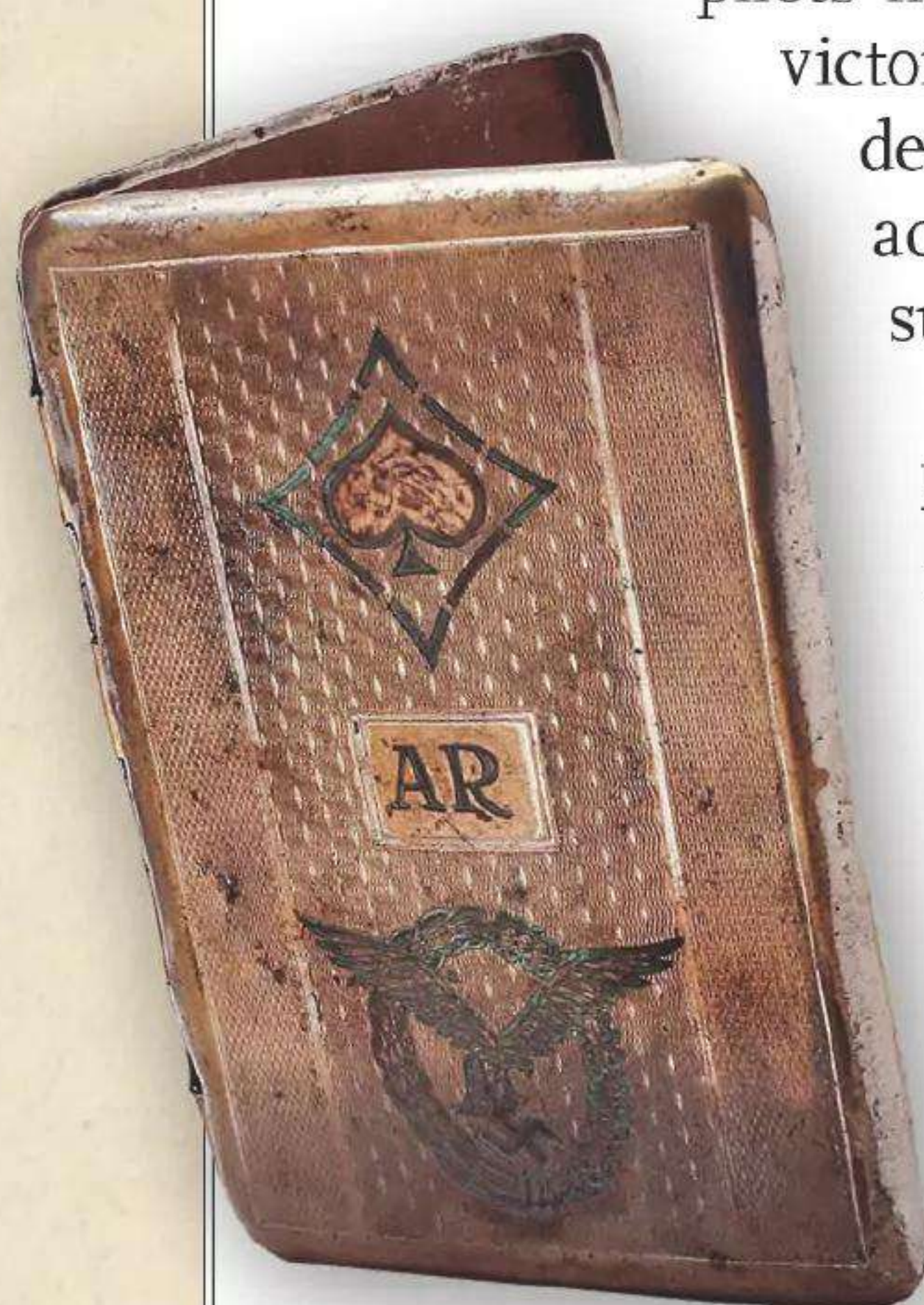
#### **PATIENCE PAYS OFF**

Pilots like Erich Hartmann and Walter Krupinski were able to easily assess what type of enemy they were up against. Soviet pilots who opened fire before they were in effective range were easy to destroy; skilled opponents were patient and waited for the opportune moment.

Pilots couldn't hear enemy planes approaching due to the noise of their own engines, and experienced flyers often hid in the clouds or flew towards the enemy with the sun directly behind them, a tactic that meant their opponent couldn't see them because of the sun's glare.

Many German pilots marked the number of kills they'd made with a series of white lines on the tail of their Messerschmitt fighters.

In desperation, some Soviet pilots deliberately flew into enemy aircraft, hoping that they themselves would survive the resulting crash landing unscathed. But the manoeuvre often cost both pilots their lives. Strategically, it made sense for the Soviets to sacrifice their aircraft if they could take out an equal number of the technically superior German planes. However,



*This cigarette case bears both the Luftwaffe's eagle and JG 53's crest – the ace of spades.*



German pilots were loath to crash behind enemy lines. Most of their skilled pilots had experience of emergency landings, but if a pilot fell into the hands of the Soviets, he would almost certainly disappear without a trace.

### CHIEF MECHANIC TRIED TO SAVE HIS FRIEND

By 20th April 1943, JG 52 had notched up 5,000 kills, but while the pilots received all the glory, they were completely dependent on their ground crews, and it was a firm tradition that the chief mechanic always greeted a returning pilot.

Erich Hartmann and his chief mechanic, Heinz Mertens, became such good friends that when Hartmann was forced to land behind enemy lines in August 1943, Mertens grabbed a rifle and water canteen and set out on his own to rescue him. Soviet soldiers found Hartmann first. Realising there was no chance of escape, the pilot feigned injury and was placed in the back of a truck with just a single guard. When a fortuitous attack by German Stuka dive bombers provided a distraction, the flying ace overpowered the guard, escaped from the truck and fled into a field of tall sunflowers. Both Hartmann and Mertens returned safely from behind Soviet lines and were reunited at a grand 'birthday party' – the term given to those gatherings held to celebrate a pilot's survival against the odds. JG 52 held a lot of birthday parties.

### GERMANY'S LUCK TURNED

But by the winter of 1943, the war had turned against the Germans, who had just lost the Battle of Stalingrad and were in full retreat. JG 52 was beginning to suffer, too. Between April and June 1943, the fighter wing lost 23 pilots. Training was cut back due to a shortage of time and fuel, and all at a time when the Soviet air force's resistance was increasing.

The pilots flew five sorties a day, and only stopped when they were killed or injured. But no matter how many aircraft they shot down, there were always more to replace them. By autumn 1943, JG 52 was the only full fighter wing left on the Eastern Front and German aircraft were outnumbered 20 to 1. The Luftwaffe pilots continued to massacre their opponents, however, reaching 8,000 kills in December 1943.

One of the main targets of JG 52 was the Soviets' powerful Ilyushin Il-2 ground-attack aircraft – known

*Luftwaffe boss Hermann Göring was also the commander of Jagdgeschwader 1.*

**Hermann Göring**

## LUFTWAFFE

### PILOTS LED THE WAY FOR THE ARMY'S ADVANCE

**1933** Shortly after seizing power, Hitler orders the creation of a German air force. The Luftwaffe is formally formed on 15th May, with World War I fighter pilot **Hermann Göring** as its commander.

**1936** New aircraft types and tactics – including bombing of civilian populations – are tested in the **Spanish Civil War**. Guernica is flattened.

**1939** At the start of the war, Germany has the most modern air force in the world with over **7,000 aircraft**.

**1940** **The Battle of Britain** is both Hitler's and the Luftwaffe's first serious defeat. The autumn clashes cost around 2,000 aircraft and more than 3,000 men.

**1941** The Luftwaffe plays a key role in the attack on the **Soviet Union**. Over 4,000 aircraft support the invasion.

**1942** A project to develop **long-range bombers** capable of attacking the United States is shelved. The Luftwaffe's primary mission remains to support the army.

**1943** The strategy shifts from attack to **defence of the Third Reich**. The number of skilled Luftwaffe pilots falls.

**1944** The Luftwaffe is strengthened with the **world's first fighter jet**, the Messerschmitt Me 262.

**1945** After **unsuccessfully attempting to regain air supremacy** in January 1945, the Luftwaffe effectively ceases to exist as a combat unit.



*This ring has oak leaves on the side and the Luftwaffe eagle emblem.*





# “Soviet pilots deliberately flew into enemy aircraft”

as “the flying tank” – which pulverised German panzer divisions and left thousands of burnt-out tanks in its wake. The Soviets built more than 36,000 Ilyushin aircraft. As Stalin remarked, the Red Army needed its Il-2 aircraft “like the air it breathes, like the bread it eats”.

## PRESSURE ON PILOTS WAS GROWING

Although JG 52 was doing its utmost to protect Germany’s ground troops, the pilots were fighting a hopeless battle. Every downed Soviet plane was replaced by more new ones. In 1944, Soviet production peaked with over 40,000 aircraft being deployed, and while German aircraft production reached similar levels, their planes were needed on several fronts.

At the same time, the Soviets had begun developing aircraft types that were on par with the Germans’. From 1944, many

German pilots deliberately avoided battling the best Soviet fighters, such as the Yak 3, which were faster and had a better rate of climb than the earlier Soviet fighters.

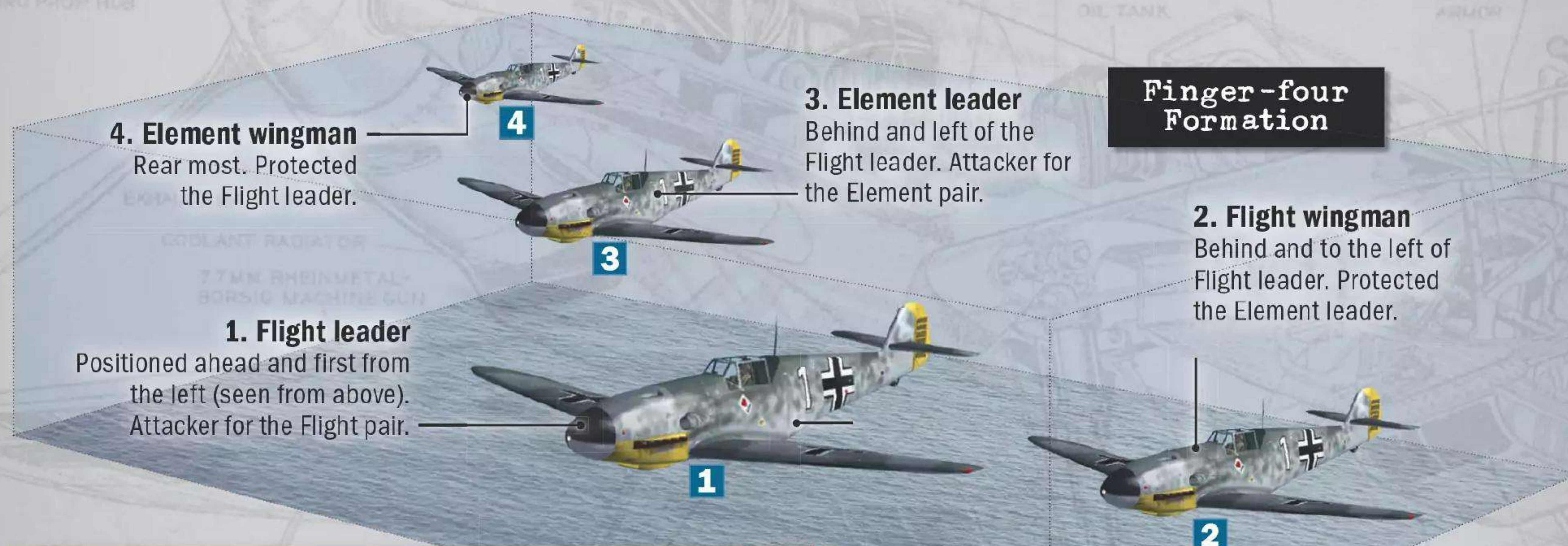
The Soviet advance also put tremendous pressure on JG 52’s air bases. In January 1944, Soviet tanks arrived for a pre-dawn attack on the base near Kropyvnytskyi in Ukraine, destroying eight aircraft before the Red Army was pushed back, and the pilots were able to fly the rest of the planes to safety.

On other occasions, JG 52 would be forced to flee with ground crew packed inside the Messerschmitt fighters’ fuselages. If the mechanics removed the radio, armour plates and other inserts, four people could squeeze into the rear section. JG 52 had to switch its base around 400 times during its time on the Eastern Front. Fields were quickly transformed with runways, tents and makeshift barracks and were then abandoned again, often after just a few days. Bad weather sometimes turned these temporary bases into mud holes,

## STRATEGY

# Aircraft attacked in pairs

The Luftwaffe’s success was helped by a tactic developed by ace pilot Werner Mölders. Known as the Finger-four Formation, the tactic had several advantages: each of the four planes had good manoeuvring space, could protect one another and could quickly split into two pairs if necessary.



## GERMANS TOPPED THE CHARTS

A flying ace was a fighter pilot who had shot down or ‘killed’ a number of enemy aircraft in combat.

- The title emerged during World War I and was bestowed on the Red Baron, German pilot Manfred von Richthofen, who downed 80 aircraft.
- Erich Hartmann was WWII’s top fighter pilot with 352 victories.
- German pilots dominated the list of top flying aces. The highest placed non-German was the Finn Ilmari Juutilainen, who achieved 94 kills.

## FACTS

JG 51 was renamed in 1942 after its commander, flying ace Werner Mölders, was killed.

Jagdgeschwader Mölders



bogging down tankers, and leaving horses to haul the fuel to the Messerschmitt fighters instead. Food and fuel were limited, spare parts for aircraft had to be transported along stretched supply lines, and many of the men were succumbing to illnesses such as pneumonia. In addition, there were nature's uninvited guests: lice and rats. Erich Hartmann described how pilots could hear lice popping when they held their clothes up to an open fire.

The most skilled pilots earned brief respites from their harsh life at the front when they were recalled to Germany to receive military decorations. The awards were made according to a simple point system. Shooting down a single-engine enemy aircraft earned one point, while a downed twin-engine earned two points and so on. On 25th August 1944, Hartmann was presented with the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds by Adolf Hitler at *Wolfsschanze* – The Wolf's Lair – military headquarters in East Prussia. Tightened security following a failed assassination attempt led to security demanding the pilot's sidearm as he was about to be ushered in to see the Führer, but Hartmann refused, stating that he would not receive the award if he was suspected of disloyalty. Hitler's aide relented and Hartmann was permitted to wear his Walther pistol during the ceremony.

### SOVIET ARCHIVES PROVED THE SUCCESS RATE

Back on the Eastern front, JG 52 reached 10,000 kills in early September 1944. Germany's ministry of propaganda took full advantage of the success – news of glorious victories at the front were becoming a rarity and the population was becoming demoralised. Joseph Goebbels even composed a special tribute to JG 52 and had it aired on German state radio.

After the war, some historians questioned whether JG 52's phenomenally high kill rate was genuine or had been inflated by German propaganda that celebrated the wing's greatest pilots as folk heroes. But research into the Soviets' recently opened wartime archives confirms the vast majority of the kills with corresponding records of Soviet aircraft shot down by German fighters. It was confirmation that JG 52 was by far the most successful fighter wing of the war.

During the first half of the war, JG 52's tactics were far ahead of their enemy's, not least their famous Finger-four Formation, in which the planes flew in groups of four, with two pairs covering one another. This configuration provided much greater manoeuvrability than the Allied wedge-shaped formation. As the war progressed, however, the Allies adopted the same tactics.

The pilots in JG 52 flew far more missions than Allied pilots, which also gave the German pilots more combat experience. While Allied pilots had rest periods and took turns to complete missions, the German pilots flew continually until they were either captured or killed.

By autumn 1944, it became increasingly obvious that the end was near. Stalin's troops gradually pushed the Germans back towards the West. The fighter wing



*While JG 52 only flew Messerschmitt Bf 109s, their counterparts in JG 51 used both Bf 109s and Focke-Wulf FW 190s.*





*It was deadly for German pilots to land behind enemy lines. If the pilots survived the landing, there was a high risk of being killed either by Soviet civilians or Red Army soldiers.*

Mölders 1941  
Knight's Cross with  
Oak Leaves, Swords  
and Diamonds.

flew above Romania, Hungary, Austria, Poland and then over the Fatherland itself, where eventually they were given the hopeless task of trying to defend Berlin against Allies approaching from both east and west.

#### TEN YEARS IN PRISON

During the last days of the war, in May 1945, Erich Hartmann and Colonel Hermann Graf, then commander of JG 52, received a final order from Luftwaffe General Hans Seidemann. While the rest of JG 52 was to surrender to the Soviets, Hartmann and

Graf must fly to Dortmund and give themselves up to the British. Seidemann didn't want the Soviets to be given the satisfaction of capturing the fighter wing's most decorated pilots, but the pair ignored the order and remained with their comrades instead.

The two men paid a high price for their loyalty. Graf was held in Soviet captivity for five years, while Hartmann was only returned to Germany and his wife, Ursula, in 1955.

The total number of kills made by JG 52 will never be known for sure, as records for the latter part of the war were lost. The Luftwaffe downed around 45,000 Soviet aircraft over the course of the war, with JG 52 probably accounting for around 10,600 of those kills.

## “German pilots were loath to crash behind enemy lines”



# Soviets built the most

During WWII, fighter aircraft were manufactured in never-surpassed numbers. The Ilyushin Il-2 was introduced a year after the Soviets started producing planes. It outclassed the Messerschmitt fighter and pushed the Spitfire into third place.

## Messerschmitt Bf 109

Concentration camp prisoners built most Messerschmitts. The assembly lines lay in large tunnels to protect them from bombs and sabotage.

**Total war production:**  
**31,766**

## Ilyushin Il-2

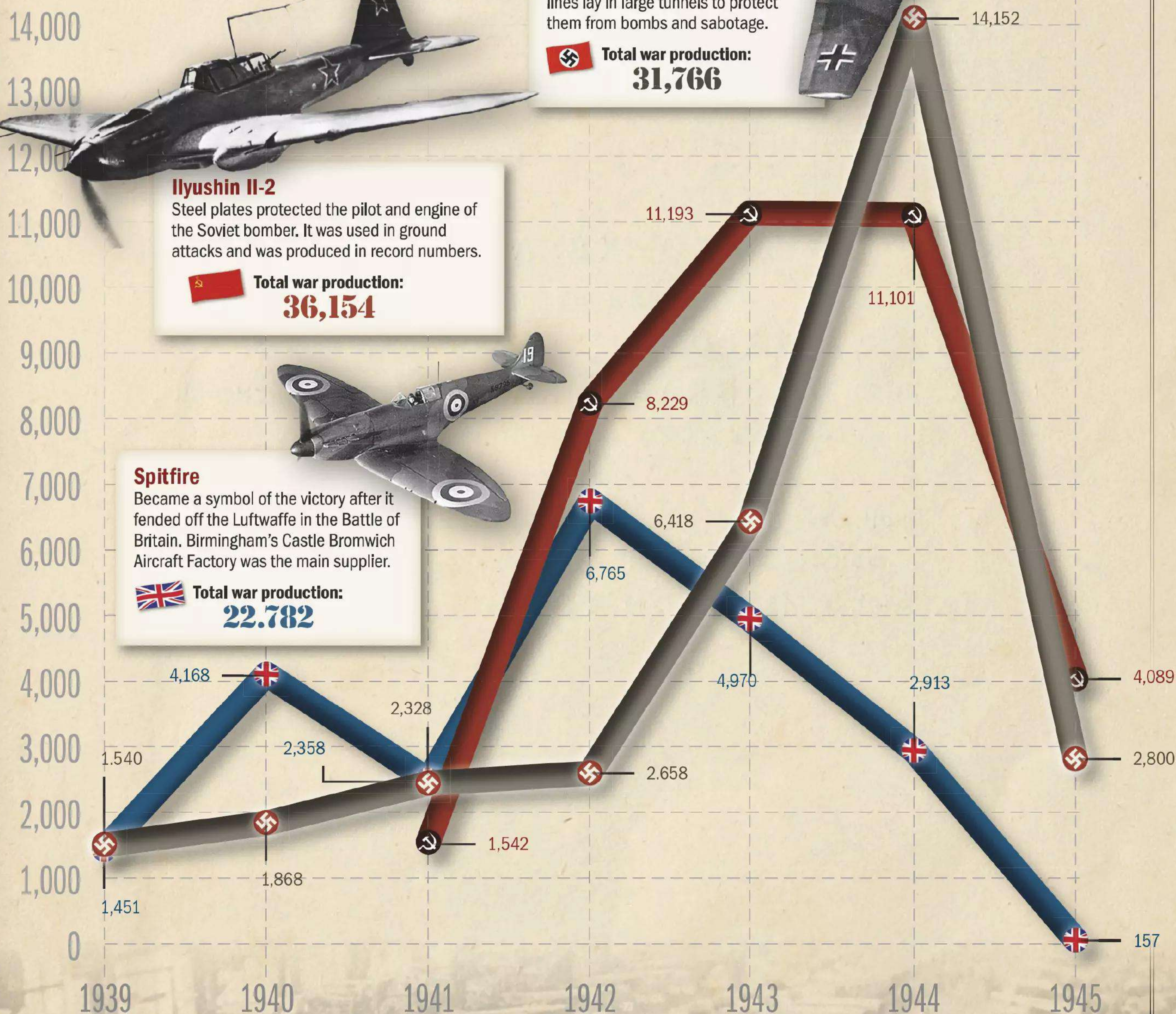
Steel plates protected the pilot and engine of the Soviet bomber. It was used in ground attacks and was produced in record numbers.

**Total war production:**  
**36,154**

## Spitfire

Became a symbol of the victory after it fended off the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain. Birmingham's Castle Bromwich Aircraft Factory was the main supplier.

**Total war production:**  
**22,782**








M. STAMM

1942

18<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER





*Stammlager IV-B – usually shortened to Stalag IV-B – in Mühlberg, south of Berlin, held many military prisoners of war.*

•  PRISONERS OF WAR  •

# CAPTURED BY THE GERMANS

The treatment of prisoners of war had been agreed by international convention since before the outbreak of World War II, but the Nazis disregarded those agreements. Hunger, thirst and casual violence were everyday occurrences for Third Reich POWs. It was worst for Soviet prisoners, around half of whom died.



## THE STAGE IS SET



In 1929, ten years before World War II, 37 countries, including Germany, sign the Geneva Convention, which states all future prisoners of war will be treated humanely. But Hitler flouts the agreement from the start, and as the war progresses, the POWs' conditions deteriorate further, especially on the Eastern Front.



ON 7TH OCTOBER 1942, Hitler sat down at his desk to draft a note. Three days before, early on 4th October, a reconnaissance party of 12 British commandos had landed on German-occupied Sark in the Channel Islands. The Germans managed to capture the commandos, but one escaped to England, where he immediately reported his findings. For Hitler, the episode proved that the Germans were too soft on prisoners of war. That would change. "All terror and sabotage troops of the British and their accomplices, who do not act like soldiers but like 'bandits', have in future to be treated as such by the German troops," the dictator announced. "And," he added, "they must be slaughtered ruthlessly in combat wherever they turn up."

Lawyers and officers translated Hitler's words into a suitably worded text and 11 days later, on 18th October, the resulting Commando Order was issued in secret, with just 12 copies being distributed. The order stated that anyone caught taking part in a commando mission should be killed on the spot, whether they were in uniform or not. The few who received the order were warned by Chief of Staff Alfred Jodl that the order was reserved for commanders and should under no circumstances fall into the hands of Germany's enemies.

The order had immediate consequences. Just five days later, on the morning of 23rd October, seven British officers were

executed at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in eastern Germany. The British had participated in an attack on the German-occupied Glomfjord power plant in Norway between the 11th and 21st September. Several other executions followed. The order was far from consistently applied, but it was used throughout the war to justify the execution of Allied soldiers and prisoners of war.

The shootings were unprecedented. According to internationally recognised principles and conventions, execution without trial was illegal, regardless of the circumstances. The Commando Order was consistent with the Nazi regime's overall treatment of prisoners of war, however. It was also part of the escalation that took place during the war, with the treatment of POWs deteriorating as the war progressed.

Soviet prisoners of war were treated especially harshly. The Nazi regime regarded

them as *untermenschen* (sub-humans) who should be killed, either directly with a bullet or through starvation. Other nationalities also suffered during their captivity as a result of the progressive brutalisation. For all German POWs, loss of dignity, hunger, sickness and death were part of everyday life.

## 2.8 million

Soviet prisoners of war died in German captivity between June 1941 and January 1942. The German Nazis regarded the Soviet troops as sub-humans.

## PRISONERS WERE MOVED IN FREIGHT CARS

The condition of each prisoner depended primarily on his nationality and ethnicity, with the Nazis ranking each according to their dogma. British and Americans were treated relatively reasonably – although, even for these groups, life as a prisoner of war was harsh, as RAF sergeant Douglas J Gillam discovered when he was shot down over France in his Bristol Beaufighter in August 1943. After a short stay at a transit camp, he and 150 other RAF personnel were put on a train to Stalag (aka Stammlager) IV-B in Saxony, in eastern Germany. They should have been placed in a special camp for air force personnel, but there was no room. The freight car that Douglas J Gillam was transported in had previously been used to carry cement, and soon the men, who had been soaked by a rain shower during the march to the train station, were smeared in a muddy, greyish mass.

Gillam later recalled in his memoirs that the train was running unusually slowly and making lots of stops.

"The only other abiding memories of the journey are the appalling smell inside the truck by the time the trip was over,



POWs were transported in open freight wagons where they were exposed to the elements and had no room to sit or lie down.



and the difficulty of trying to find enough floor space to lie down on at night. Everybody tried to get a patch as far away as possible from the latrine bucket in the corner.”

### PARCELS KEPT PRISONERS ALIVE

Stalag IV-B was one of the camps the Germans had built at the outbreak of the war in 1939. Already by the spring, as German troops marched into Czechoslovakia, the army had devised suitable holding camps for prisoners of war. Among the army's criteria was that the installations should be away from main arterial roads, but not further than five kilometres from a train station, and that the terrain should be flat, with good visibility and easily accessible water. The camps shot up across Germany and its occupied territories. As the war progressed, the number grew steadily, peaking at over 100 camps in 1942.

Stalag IV-B, with its 30 acres, was intended for a maximum of 10,000 prisoners, but always held more – by the end of the war, there were as many as 30,000 there. When Douglas J Gillam arrived, there was still room for each prisoner to have his own bunk. The bed, which consisted of wooden boards covered with a thin, straw-stuffed mattress, was in a barracks that Gillam shared with other RAF regulars. The food usually consisted of a thin soup with potatoes or margarine and bread. At times, the men even got something termed jam. “This commodity had the appearance and texture of mashed beetroot. We were once told that it was a by-product of the chemicals-from-coal industry,” Gillam wrote. The food had little nutritional value. Red Cross food parcels were therefore crucial. “Without food sent to us by the Red Cross, many prisoners would have fallen victim to the dangers of malnutrition or even starvation,” Gillam says.

In addition to the foodstuffs, which, for the British in particular, consisted of powdered milk, bacon, biscuits, cheese and chocolate, the packages also contained cigarettes.

### CIGARETTES WERE CURRENCY

Cigarettes were used, among other things, as currency when cards were played, or as a means of payment at the theatrical performances that the prisoners set up for entertainment in Stalag IV-B and other camps. The camp also had several clubs where the prisoners could meet to practise sports or other common interests. The prisoners, however, were always at the mercy of the guards, and violence was frequent and arbitrary. Gillam recalled how a fellow prisoner was shot one night for trying to steal coal from the camp's warehouse to warm up the freezing

*Inmates in Stalag IV-B wore ID tags stamped with their prison number.*

barracks. Private Tom Barker from the Scottish Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders infantry regiment also reported what happened to a group of prisoners who were caught stealing potato peelings in Stalag IV-B by a vicious guard known as Blondie:

“Blondie saw them and put his pistol to the back of one bloke's head and shot him, and beat the other senseless with his pick handle and broke his arm, and lashed out at others who came too close to him. He then made the rest pick up the dead man and put him on the rubbish cart....[He] was taken to the pit and burnt along with the rubbish.”

The men Blondie attacked were Soviet. The Soviet prisoners lived in a separate camp at Stalag IV-B, and

## Geneva Convention banned the execution of POWs

The rules for how prisoners of war and the wounded were to be treated had been adopted ten years before the outbreak of World War II.

In 1929, a number of countries signed the Geneva Convention, which stipulated how belligerent nations should treat enemies who were stranded on the wrong side in a war, including the wounded, prisoners of war and civilians. The convention consisted of four treaties and three protocols, the third of which came into force in 1931. It states that prisoners of war must be treated with respect and that prisoners belonging to the same category should be treated equally. It also requires the warring parties to treat their prisoners in the same way as their own soldiers in terms of food and accommodation.

*German troops execute 56 Polish prisoners near Kraków following the German invasion in December 1939.*



# POWs were divided by rank

By 1942, around 100 prison camps were scattered across German-held territories. The camps were divided according to military type and rank. There were also civilian camps.



## Stalag IV-B

Stalag IV-B, south of Berlin, was a camp for POWs, but from 1943 it also housed other types of inmates. The camp was one of the largest in Germany.

## CAMP TYPES

FACT

Stammlager – Stalag for short-housed regular soldiers.

★ Offizierslager – shortened to Oflag – were camps for captured Allied officers.

● Luftwaffe-Stammlager – abbreviated to Stalag Luft – was a prison camp for air force personnel.

▲ Internment camps – known as Ilag or Jlag – were prison camps for interned civilians.

✚ Lazarett were hospitals that cared for injured Allies.



*The healthiest prisoners of war were put on parade when Red Cross envoys came to visit German camps.*





POWs had to try to survive on a nutrient-poor diet, which typically consisted of thin soup along with potatoes or bread with margarine. Many of the prisoners died of malnutrition.

unlike the British, American, Australian and South African soldiers, lived on starvation rations. The Soviet prisoners were put to work and given demeaning tasks, such as emptying the latrines. They were also exposed to random acts of brutality far more often than other POWs. In addition, the Germans conducted a systematic campaign to eradicate as many of this 'inferior' race as possible.

The German government's policy was that such killings should take place without regard to any petty international conventions or laws. Even before the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Hitler decreed that when fighting the Soviets "Any German soldier who breaks international law will be pardoned." The promise, issued in March 1941, claimed that as Russia had never signed the Geneva Convention, it wasn't protected by its contents. It was a hollow argument. The accord, which Germany had signed, stipulated that *all* prisoners of whatever nationality should be treated humanely – a principle that Germany's Finnish, Romanian and Italian allies

complied with. Hitler assumed there wouldn't be any witnesses to the atrocities left, as the idea was to 'cleanse' the entire eastern frontier to make room for German settlers.

### WEAK POWs WERE SHOT

German officers did not hold back either. After the invasion on 22nd June 1941, Captain Finselberg of the 23rd Infantry

Division ordered his regiment not to take prisoners, as the Russians were "useless consumers

of food and anyway a race whose extermination would be a step in the right direction". Jewish prisoners of war, prisoners from the Asian Soviet republics and those believed to be 'Communist agitators' were often shot on the spot when captured. The executioners were either Wehrmacht officers or men under the control of the SD, the Nazis' security service.

Those who survived were marched to a German prison camp. They were given almost no food. Some had just 300 calories, less than a tenth of what a physically active man needs. At night, the prisoners were forced to sleep on the floor in barbed-wire enclosures. "Whenever we halted, thousands of those dying from hunger and cold remained or they collapsed as we marched along. Those still alive were finished off by soldiers wielding sub-machine guns. A guard would kick a fallen prisoner and, if he could not get up in time, fired his gun," Nikolai Obrynba, a doctor who was taken prisoner at Vitebsk during the German advance to Moscow, later testified.

When the snow halted the marches, the prisoners were transported by train. The journey took place in open wagons. In December 1941, between 25 and 70 percent of all prisoners transported in this way died. A prisoner known only as Gutyrya spoke of his trip to Stalag 304 prison camp: >>>

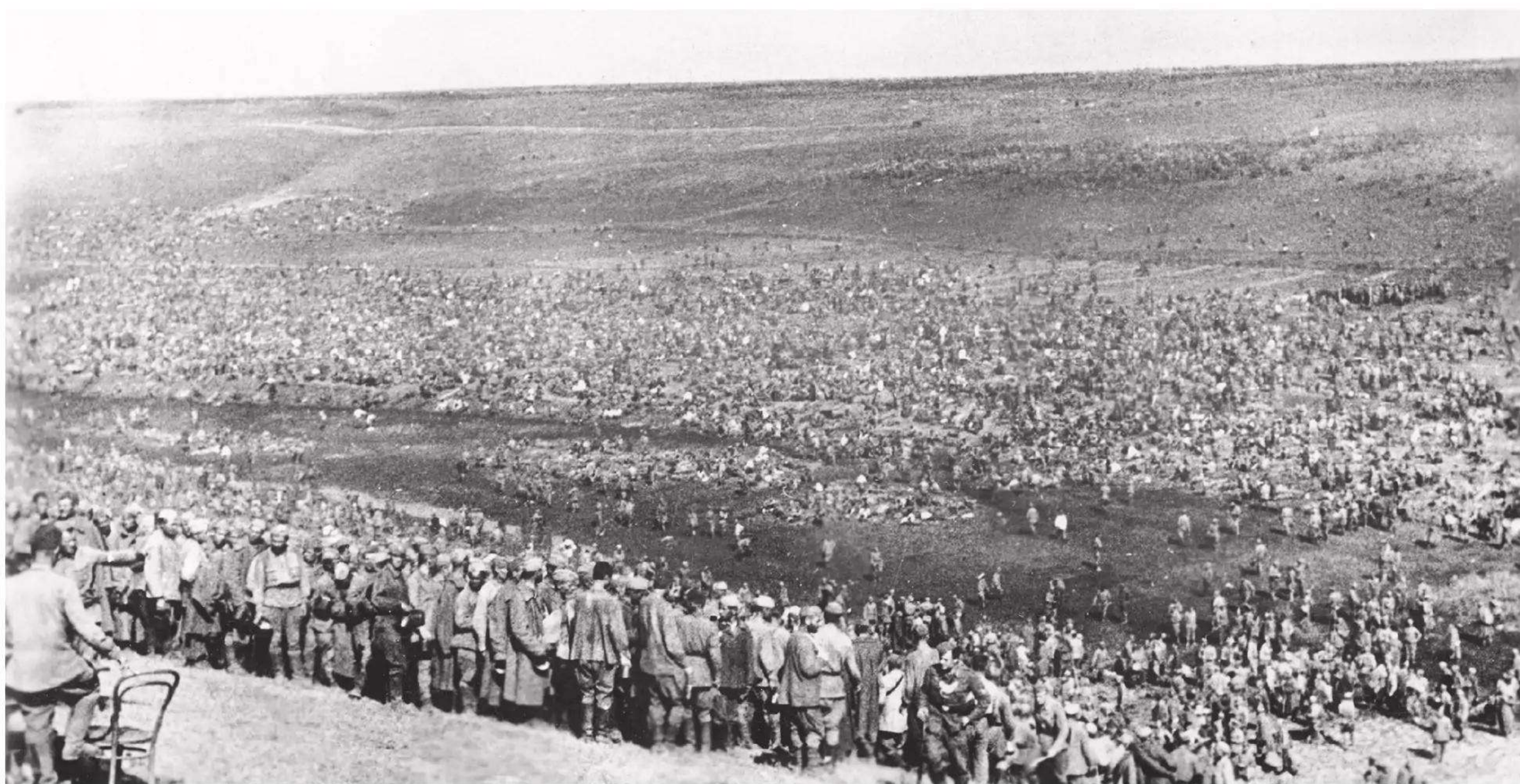


Red Cross food and medicine helped the prisoners lucky enough to get them to survive.

**8,348**

Allied soldiers from Western nations died in German captivity during World War II. The total number of Western Allied men captured by the Germans was 232,000.





Soviet prisoners of war in a makeshift German prison camp. More than half of the Soviets captured by the Germans died. Many were executed immediately; others died in captivity or were sent out on long, gruelling marches that few survived.

“Men died in each wagon. They died of blood loss, tetanus, blood poisoning, or hunger, thirst and suffocation as well as other deprivation. This inhumane ordeal lasted for 10 days.”

### THE SOUP WAS MADE WITH ROTTEN MEAT

Most Soviet prisoners in 1941 were housed in *Russenlager*, special camps for Russian POWs. The camps had no kitchens, canteens or hospitals. Many did not even have barracks. “You just had to dig yourselves a hole in the ground to sleep in and we slid inside there, four at a time; you had to find room to bend your legs. We were really cold. It was winter. Every day they sent a cart to pick up the dead,” Pavai Atayan, a prisoner in Stalag 318, later recalled.

The prisoners could go for days without receiving food. Since the Soviet Union had not signed the Geneva Convention, the Nazis didn’t give Soviet prisoners Red Cross food parcels. Wild with hunger, they ate anything they could find. On 11th September 1941, Colonel Falkenberg, commander of Stalag 318, wrote “These cursed *untermenschen* have been

**3.5 million**

Soviet prisoners of war died while being held captive by the Axis Powers during World War II. A total of 5.7 million Soviet soldiers were captured.

observed eating grass, flowers and raw potatoes. Once they can’t find anything edible in the camp they turn to cannibalism.”

One witness who lived near a *Russenlager* in Karolowka, south-east Poland, reported how “At the camp the hunger is so terrible that a mile away they can be heard groaning and shouting ‘Food!’”

The little sustenance the Soviet prisoners did receive could barely be called food. The bread was baked according to a recipe issued by the German Ministry of Food on 24th November 1941. The directive required that bread baked for the Soviets consisted of 50 percent rye bran, 20 percent sugar beet residue, 20 percent corn husk flour and 10 percent flour made from straw or leaves.

The meat rations were small and of abysmal quality. “All we were getting to eat was watery soup with pieces of rotten meat...It was the

flesh of dead horses killed and lying alongside the roads since the German air strikes in the first week of July,” recalled Soviet soldier Gabriel Temkin, who was captured in 1942.

### SICK PRISONERS WERE EXECUTED

Sickness also flourished among the starving men. Gutyrva remembers how a typhoid epidemic ravaged Stalag 304. “Up to 500 men died of this illness each day. The dead were thrown in mass graves, one on top of the other. Misery, cold weather, hunger, disease, death. That was camp 304.”

Few Soviet soldiers received help when they were ill. Some were laid outside, where they froze to death. Elsewhere, as in Stalag 324, it was a normal weekly procedure to shoot the sick. In camp 359 B, the commander stopped an outbreak of dysentery by shooting all the sick prisoners. By 1942, 6,000 Soviet soldiers were dying every day, either as a direct result of disease or because the Germans shot them for being sick.

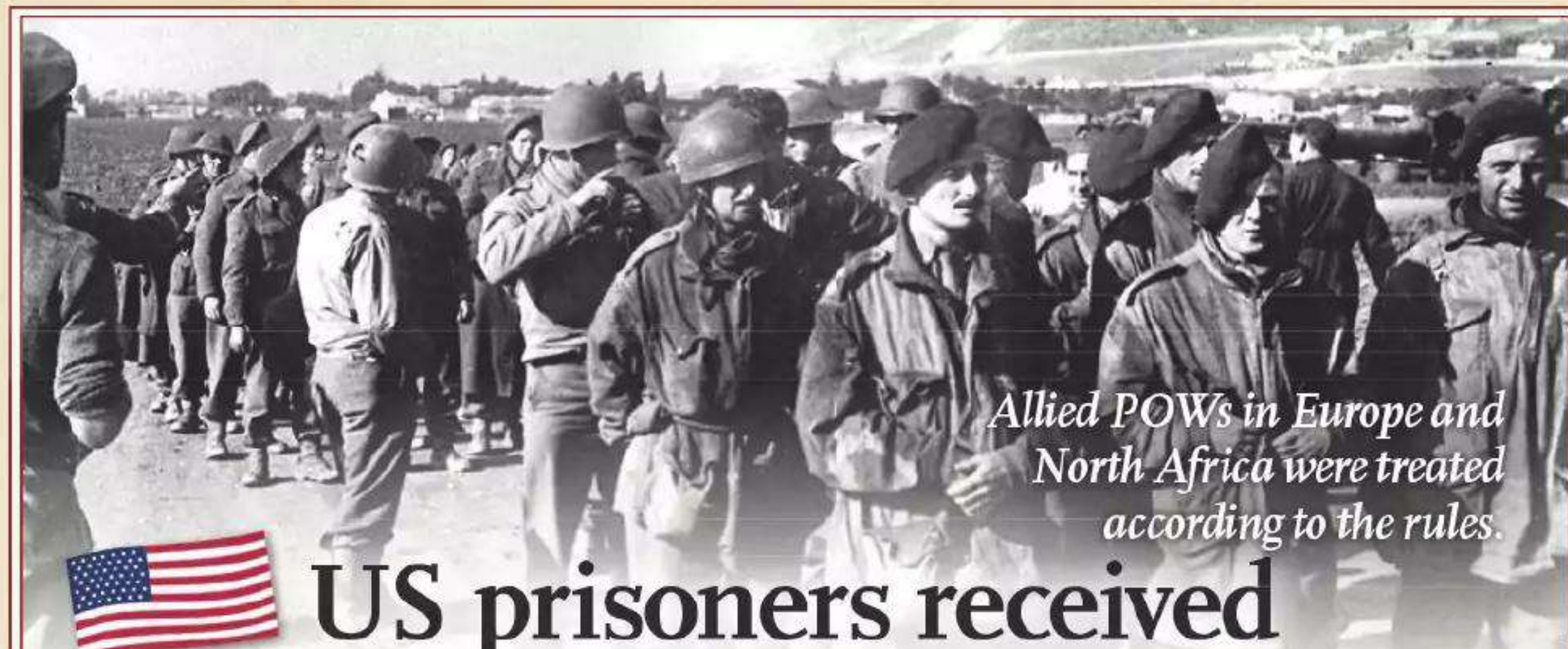


Nazi POWs in Britain were taught German history without Third Reich spin.



# POWs died in droves

Millions of soldiers died in captivity during World War II. Typical causes were disease, cold, hunger and malnutrition – that's if the POWs weren't simply executed immediately upon arrival at the prison camps. Soviet soldiers in German captivity suffered more than most.



*Allied POWs in Europe and North Africa were treated according to the rules.*

## US prisoners received Red Cross aid parcels

Like Allied prisoners from Western Europe, US soldiers in German captivity in Europe and Africa were packed into camps with poor hygiene and sanitation, but they were treated relatively well. Red Cross parcels helped them survive.

**2.8%** of US soldiers held in German captivity died.

## British POWs were treated humanely

British soldiers in German camps had to put up with poor sanitary conditions and the threat of disease, which thrived in the densely populated prisons. Otherwise, they were treated relatively well and received aid parcels from the Red Cross.

**3.5%** of British soldiers held in German captivity died.



*German defence force officers call forward British prisoners of war in Norway.*

*Soviet prisoners of war in a temporary holding pen near Tver Oblast beg for food from a passer-by.*

## German prisoners died in the Russian winters

A large percentage of German POWs held by the Soviet Union died of cold in the icy Russian winters or through starvation. The prisoners were put to hard labour.

**35.8%** of German soldiers held in Soviet captivity died.



*German soldiers captured during the Soviet offensive in Belarus and Poland in 1944.*

## Germans treated Soviet POWs inhumanely

The Germans regarded the Russians as sub-humans to be exterminated. Many Russian soldiers were killed as soon as they were captured.

**57.5%** of the Soviet soldiers held in German captivity died.





*The city was quickly reduced to a maze of ruins. Soviet soldiers lay in wait among the rubble, and the Germans felt they were fighting an invisible foe.*

# 1942

13<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER





•  • TURNING POINT ON THE EASTERN FRONT •  •

# ATTACK ON STALINGRAD

In autumn 1942, the Soviet industrial city of Stalingrad became the scene for a duel between Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler. Both dictators laid claim to a city that was quickly reduced to smoking rubble, and were willing to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of lives to secure victory.



## Stalingrad 1942

## THE STAGE IS SET

➤ In June 1941, Germany invades the Soviet Union. The following year, Hitler's troops reach Stalingrad and advance into the city. But the street battles prove a bigger challenge than Germany anticipated, and there's no turning back. Stalin wants to keep the city at all costs while Hitler refuses to allow his troops to withdraw.



**A**N INCREDIBLE SIGHT met young Soviet soldier Mikhail Panikakha when he arrived on the east bank of the river Volga one night in late September 1942. On the far side of the river, Stalingrad was lit up like a torch from flames and explosions, as tracer bullets and searchlights danced about in the sky. In the middle of this inferno, raw Soviet recruits attempted to slow the German advance into the ruins of this once-thriving industrial city.

The desperate defenders' only lifeline was the Volga, where an armada of barges and small boats ferried food, ammunition, and reinforcements from the eastern side every night. That night, Panikakha and his comrades from the 883rd Rifle Regiment crossed the river and were

immediately sent to the front line where rubble and stinking corpses lay everywhere. Exhausted soldiers would tell the newcomers that the average lifespan of recruits in Stalingrad was just a few days.

**THE CITY MUST BE DEFENDED TO THE LAST MAN**

On 1st October – three days after his arrival in Stalingrad – Panikakha lay in a trench at the Red October steelworks when a German tank rolled towards him. He ignited the rags that served as primitive fuses for two Molotov cocktails, but manage spill part of the flammable liquid over himself.

His uniform was already in flames when he jumped out of his hiding place and ran like a human torch towards the armoured colossus. Panikakha smashed

the bottles on the tank's front grille and it exploded in a fireball. His sacrifice was perfect for Soviet propaganda: Panikakha was the type of soldier the

*The Germans entered Stalingrad in mid-September, and a five-month bloody nightmare began.*







NAME

**FRIEDRICH PAULUS**

TITLE

FIELD MARSHAL

**Paulus was Hitler's hero**

Friedrich Paulus was regarded as a competent staff officer, who always obeyed orders. In Hitler's eyes, this made him the perfect candidate when the strong 6th Army needed a new commander in 1942. Paulus led the siege of Stalingrad and obediently followed instructions from Berlin instead of making his own plans for capturing the devastated city.

- Began as a cadet in 1910.
- Spent 10 years in prison.



1890-1957



NAME

**VASILY CHUIKOV**

TITLE

MARSHAL

**Chuikov had a free hand**

Vasily Chuikov was given the task of leading the Soviet 62nd Army in the defence of Stalingrad. The Germans had superior numbers and weapons, but Chuikov adapted his units and tactics to the city's ruins. He remained in Stalingrad even when his troops only held a small bridgehead on the river. The Red Army's commanders could not dictate orders during battles, giving him a freer hand than any other Soviet general.

- Was military attaché in China until 1942.
- Participated in the capture of Berlin.



1900-1982

Red Army needed to defend Stalingrad, and soon leaflets at the front called on others to follow his example.

Powerful German forces had reached the city's outskirts in late August 1942. They were part of Hitler's huge *Fall Blau* (Case Blue) offensive, its ultimate aim to capture the Caucasus and its vast oil fields. In the original German plan, Stalingrad was only a secondary target, but Stalin believed Soviet forces' morale would plummet if the city bearing his name fell into enemy hands. The dictator consequently demanded that Stalingrad be defended to the last man.

Despite this, the city would receive no reinforcements because Stalin feared a German offensive against Moscow, and so the Red Army's weak 62nd Army would have to fight alone. Its complement consisted of poorly trained soldiers who'd already suffered heavy losses in battles west of the city and were now relying on help from local workers' militias. On the opposite side stood the imposing German 6th Army, comprising 250,000 men and whose commander, General Friedrich Paulus, anticipated a swift victory. On 13th September he sent his divisions forward.

**ODDS WEIGHED HEAVILY IN GERMANS' FAVOUR**

A Soviet soldier described with horror the sight of the German armoured columns and combat troops. "It looked like a terrible swarm of black insects was devouring Stalingrad. They were so well-armed and equipped – and more and more of them kept coming: we thought they were going to roll right over us."

Within a few hours the Germans had captured the Mamaev Kurgan, a hill that stood between the city centre and the industrial area to the north, giving Hitler's forces a clear vantage point down the Volga. Meanwhile, other Germans advanced into the heart of the city, where they approached the vital ferry crossing at ominous speed.

The invaders had around twice as many soldiers as the 62nd Army, five times as many tanks and enjoyed complete

air supremacy. Only a ruthless decision saved the city from falling on just the second day of the battle. Several weeks of German air strikes had already taught Soviet troops to only cross the Volga under cover of nightfall. But on 14th September, the 62nd Army in Stalingrad was in such a precarious position that several thousand soldiers were commanded to cross the river to support them in full daylight.

The boats sailed through bombs, grenades, and projectiles, and fewer than half of the defenceless soldiers survived the trip. But the survivors were immediately thrown into a counterattack that prevented a swift German victory.

**PEASANT'S SON TOOK COMMAND**

Over the following weeks each new German offensive threatened to push the Soviets into the Volga. But after the initial shock, Lieutenant General Vasily Chuikov began to settle the defences. The 42-year-old had been given command of the 62nd Army shortly before the Germans attacked, and he was a warrior by nature. He combined raw strength with an explosive temper, inherited from a peasant father who had been a skilled wrestler and bare-knuckle boxer.

His fury at those officers who did not meet his high expectations often spilled over into physical violence. But the rank-and-file troops came to love him because Chuikov was like them: coarse facial features, dark and bushy hair as well as a rough sense of humour. And he was never far from the front line. Where his counterpart Paulus would bark his orders from calm surroundings 100 kilometres

behind the front, Chuikov's headquarters lay at the heart of Stalingrad's inferno throughout the battle.

"The impact on us was colossal: our own chief was there with us, in the middle of this hell. We gained fresh determination to hold onto our positions," one company commander said of the general who often visited the trenches wearing his distinctive black greatcoat. Chuikov also urged his officers to share their more generous rations

**"A swarm of black insects was devouring Stalingrad"**

A Soviet soldier on the German armoured columns



# Battle destroyed the city

In 1942, Stalingrad was a city with 400,000 residents. During the bloody fighting in the streets, the German 6th Army and Soviet 62nd Army lost over one million men between them.

## 1 German Blitzkrieg reaches city centre

The German 6th Army launches a lightning attack on 13th September. The aim is to capture the city with a swift, decisive move, but even though the invaders advance deep into the centre, they're slowed by fierce Soviet resistance.

## 2 Each side takes turns to attack

The railway station is located centrally, between the Germans and their route to the Volga, and is the scene of bitter fighting. It changes hands four times on 15th September alone, while counterattacks continue until 19th September.

## 3 Thick concrete protects defenders

The grain silo near the riverbank has heavy concrete walls, providing effective protection for the 50 Soviet soldiers inside. German units launch an attack on 17th September, but even though the interior fills with smoke from fires, they suffer heavy losses as the defenders hold firm for five days.

## 4 German tanks finally reach the Volga

The ferry port is essential for Soviet troops as it's here reinforcements disembark. When the Germans capture the quayside on 22nd September, they're close to breaking all organised resistance in the centre. But instead, Soviet engineering troops build a new port at the Red October steelworks to the north. The Germans never succeed in fully disrupting nightly traffic over the Volga.

*German aircraft quickly sank ferries on the Volga. They were replaced by small boats.*



## 5 Sergeant resists for two months

"Pavlov's House" is a residential building within the Soviet defensive line. Here, Sergeant Yakov Pavlov continues to fight with a handful of Soviet soldiers even after the rest of the city centre has fallen. The small band repel all German attacks for the rest of the battle.



## 9 Attack stalls

On 14th October, German troops go forward with renewed vigour, and day by day they fight from factory to factory. But the 62nd Army maintains its last landing point along the Volga, and by the end of the month, German forces are exhausted.

## 8 The German offensive is a bloody nightmare

In the industrial district, Soviets continue to stubbornly produce weapons throughout the battle. Soviet tanks roll directly from the assembly line to the front nearby. For German troops, the advance into the industrial area is even worse than when they attacked Stalingrad's centre. Whole divisions are committed to the fray, where they must pay dearly for every square metre captured.



The battle for the factories lasted one gruelling month.



## 7 The Red Army strikes first

Mamaev Kurgan is a hill that towers 102 metres above the Volga and offers good all-round visibility. Attacks and counterattacks sweep back and forth across its summit from day one of the battle. On 27th September, as the Germans are about to launch their attack to the north, Soviet storm groups attack the slopes.

## 6 New campaign aims to end the battle

On 27th September, a new German thrust begins. Its aim is to end the resistance in Stalingrad's industrial area before the harsh Soviet winter sets in.

Street battles cost both sides dearly. The wounded were patched up and shipped out of the city.



*1,000 tonnes of bombs rained down on Stalingrad prior to the army's attack.*



*Aerial attacks cost the lives of at least 30,000 of Stalingrad's 400,000 inhabitants. The survivors moved into caves dug into the cliffs near the city.*

of butter, biscuits, sugar, and cigarettes with their men, and forbade them to use their rank to obtain privileges. The common suffering among the ruins created a special spirit among the 62nd Army, despite its horrific losses. The general's greatest asset, however, was his tactical acumen that helped him understand the specialised demands of urban warfare.

### HOUSES WERE FORTRESSES

Stalin had made his position clear. "Not one step back!" Order Number 227 declared. Any officer who allowed his men to retreat would be brought before a war tribunal.

Chuikov's main defensive line consisted of a series of heavily fortified positions located in the city's most solid buildings. They were surrounded by barbed wire and mines, so the Germans had difficulty getting close to them.

These makeshift fortresses served as breakwaters to make a co-ordinated advance difficult for the Germans. When the

posts were attacked, their crews summoned aid from a steadily growing number of gun batteries on the Volga's east bank.

"The Fascist troops will shatter upon these obstacles as sea waves are broken by granite rock," Chuikov declared in terms his soldiers could understand.

A property on Penzenskaya Street held special meaning for the soldiers of the 62nd Army, for it was frequently mentioned in Soviet propaganda. The building, which became known as "Pavlov's House", housed a Soviet garrison led by Sergeant Yakov Pavlov, who stubbornly fought on long after all other Soviet forces had been driven away. The official report stated

that he'd stormed the building with just 25 men, prepared to make the ultimate self-sacrifice.

But several eyewitnesses recalled that Pavlov's House was both strongly fortified and well-staffed. Soviet soldiers stayed in basements and bunkers between fighting, where they were better protected from shells. In the basement of Pavlov's House, the men cooked food on a cast iron stove, and even

slept on mattresses, but always with their boots on.

The basement also housed several families who hadn't managed to flee the city in time. Here a pregnant woman gave birth to a girl named Sina, whose father had been a soldier who'd fallen in the first days of the battle. The newborn was given no hope of surviving, but Pavlov's men, who

**"Our own chief  
 was there with  
 us, in the middle  
 of this hell"**

*Company commander on General Chuikov*



# Weapons for urban warfare

Soviet soldiers used both grenades and spades for close-quarter combat in the city's ruins. In open spaces, battle raged between tanks and anti-tank weapons.

UNIFORMS

## The PPSH-41 machine gun

was the preferred Soviet weapon for close combat.



**900 shots** a minute were fired by the gun – twice as many as the German MP-40.

## Anti-tank gunner

The beret's red star revealed that the gunner belonged to the Red Army.



## The PTRD anti-tank rifle

was the only Soviet armoured weapon that could be operated by a single person.



**14.5 mm ammunition** could penetrate 40-mm armour. German tanks were particularly vulnerable on their flanks.

The poncho provided protection against rain, plus served as camouflage in the city's grey ruins.

**Leather helmet** with built-in radio indicated that the man was part of a tank crew.

**Black leather jacket** was the winter uniform for tank squadron personnel.

The gun was the semi-automatic TT-33, a widespread Soviet handgun.

## Senior sergeant



**Trousers** were black leather like the jacket.

**RGD-33 hand grenade** had a steel jacket, which exploded in a lethal shower of shrapnel.



The spade was razor sharp and used as a silent weapon during night raids on German positions.



**Trousers** were wide up to their thighs, narrowing at the calf, so they would fit inside the boots.

**Half-length boots** were standard footwear for all soldiers in the Red Army.



otherwise quickly acclimatised to the suffering around them, dared to provide food for the nursing mother. Sina survived.

Chuikov quickly realised during the early exchanges how to nullify the Germans' superiority in both aircraft and guns. He ordered his troops to "hug" the enemy. Distances between both front lines should be as short as possible – as little as 25-50 metres, preferably – so the Germans couldn't bombard Soviet positions without also hitting their own.

"If the enemy is trying to create distance between our forces we don't let him do it", Chuikov instructed his Soviet units.

### "STALIN'S ORGANS" STOOD ALONG THE RIVER

The only Soviet artillery on the Volga's west bank were Katyusha rocket launchers. The Germans called them "Stalin's Organs", and they were mounted on trucks that hid behind the river's high banks. The vehicles drove down to the water's edge to fire all 16 rockets in quick succession, before driving back to cover. Their mobility made them difficult to hit.

On the Volga's eastern shore, thousands of Soviet guns were set up so they could rain shells down on German positions in Stalingrad. The artillery units were designated targets by Soviet observers who hid inside the city's ruins. The challenge lay in targeting German units of a certain size that could be hit without simultaneously taking out Soviet soldiers.

### 62ND ARMY FOUGHT AT NIGHT

Where the Germans tried to create order and clarity, Chuikov adapted to the inevitable chaos of street battles in the

shattered city. Instead of large operations involving thousands of soldiers, he divided his men into storm groups of only 50 to 80 men who could better move through Stalingrad's labyrinthine ruins. Each group was split into a storming party, plus consolidation, and reserve groups. Units operated after sunset when they could move without fear of air raids. Germans were usually resting to restore strength for the next day, and rarely ventured out in the darkness when artillery and aircraft were unable to provide targeted support.

Soviet private Suren Mirzoyan described a night attack on the state bank, where 30 German soldiers were based. The Soviets blasted their way into the building only to find themselves so close to the enemy that they had to battle with knives and spades. Mirzoyan found himself being strangled by a German, but slashed at his neck with his knife.

"This kind of close combat is unlike anything else. Once you are inside a building a machine gun is no longer any use, there is no time to load it, and no room to use it effectively. Knives and small, sharp spades are the best weapons for storm group fighting – it is all about physical toughness and quick reflexes," he recalled.

Close-quarter fighting terrified the Germans, as did the inevitable ambushes where Soviet soldiers suddenly attacked patrols from the rear. As German units moved forward, Chuikov's storm groups sneaked behind them using sewers, buildings, and basements where they'd previously bored a hole in the partition walls.

Wilhem Hoffman was a soldier with the German 94th Infantry Division and took

*Some snipers preferred to hunt their prey alone, but small groups could provide cover for each other.*

### SNIPERS

FACTS

Soviet snipers made great inroads into the German lines. They hunted alone or in small groups and were at the enemy's mercy if their position was discovered, so they followed the snipers' four commandments:

- **Change position.** Move after each shot.
- **Find next position.** Always know in advance where your next position is.
- **Choose far-off targets.** Don't shoot at nearby targets. If you do, the enemy can judge the distance and direction of your shot.
- **Keep calm.** Any careless movement can expose you.



part in the battle for Stalingrad's centre. He noted his disgust in his diary: "You don't see them at all, they have established themselves in houses and cellars and are firing on all sides, including from our rear – barbarians, they use gangster methods... Stalingrad is hell."

The battle continued with heavy losses and untold suffering on both sides until the end of September, when Stalingrad's centre was finally in German hands.

But this was just the first act, and the next was about to begin – with even greater ferocity and yet more casualties.

### **"RAT WAR" FRUSTRATED THE GERMANS**

The Germans' strength lay in blitzkrieg warfare, thrusting deep into enemy territory at high speed. But Stalingrad afforded none of these advantages. The ruins hid Soviet positions and snipers, who added to the casualty lists each day.

"The enemy is invisible," wrote a frustrated General Karl Strecker, highly respected chief of XI Corps, to a friend. The Germans dubbed these tactics as *Rattenkrieg* ("Rat War"), and joked bitterly about how they had to fight on for the bedroom and living room long after capturing the kitchen.

The rank-and-file detested close combat, where they never had a moment to catch their breath, and death was a constant threat. The battle for a four-storey warehouse became a typical example of the chaotic front. The opposing parties sat like layers of a cake with Germans controlling the top and bottom floors, while the Soviets stubbornly defended those in the middle. Everyone's uniforms were covered with the same greyish brown dust, making it hard to distinguish friend from foe.

Stalin and Hitler were – of course – far removed from the harsh reality of the daily struggles. The original strategic reasons for capturing or holding Stalingrad were soon forgotten – now it was purely about ego. The battle must be won no matter the cost, and tens of thousands of fresh troops were thrown into the fray.

### **SMOKE AND DUST OBLITERATED SUN**

As the German cemeteries grew larger behind the front line,

Hitler became increasingly obsessed with capturing Stalingrad: "No man will shift us from this spot," the Führer boasted in a speech to Berliners on 30th September 1942.

His generals warned that the capture of the oil fields in the Caucasus should be completed before winter and that the drawn-out front line could be shortened by pulling some of the scattered forces back. Hitler ignored their warnings and recommendations, ordering a new offensive in Stalingrad.

On 14th October, Chuikov's divisions woke up to the Luftwaffe's biggest attack yet. Stuka dive bombers swooped down from the sky to drop their bomb loads precisely above the target to avoid hitting the German positions.

"We had to push the bombs into the target like loaves of bread into the oven," said *Oberstleutnant* (Wing Commander)

Paul-Werner Hozzel, aged 31. The seasoned pilot commanded the Stukas, which flew 12,000 missions over the city. The air strikes were then followed by shelling from more than 2,000 German guns and mortars. High above the battlefield the sun shone, but down on the ground darkness ruled.

"It was no longer possible to see the sun, only a sad brown circlet, peeping through the clouds. Spumes of earth, fire and smoke rose up around us. It was not possible to hear the sound of individual shooting anymore – there was just a rolling, thunderous wall of noise," said Lieutenant Anatoly Mereshko.

### **THE RUINS WERE ALIVE**

As the guns fell silent, 90,000 Germans attacked with 300 tanks along a five-kilometre-wide front. Their target was three large factories in Stalingrad where Chuikov still held out.

His 62nd Army comprised only 20,000 soldiers and around 20 operational tanks, but the Soviets had barricaded every street to slow the German tanks, knocked holes in the buildings for anti-tank guns and assembled large stocks of explosives. As the German soldiers and tanks moved forward, Soviet soldiers swarmed from their shelter in the ruins – the heavy bombardment had had little effect.

"[It was] as if we had dropped toy torpedoes instead of bombs," a shocked Hozzel recalled.

Despite the setback, the strong German units still forced the defenders back, and the strip along the Volga dwindled to a mere 200-metre-wide belt. The Germans now controlled 90 percent of Stalingrad and kept the rest under constant shelling. Even the eternally optimistic General Chuikov had difficulty seeing a way out on the afternoon of 15th October.

The Germans were advancing towards his headquarters, and he called his younger brother, who was serving on his staff: "Feodor, one of us has to get out of here alive. When the Germans break through I will take my machine gun and make a last stand at the Volga's edge. I'm not going to surrender to them – I will die fighting," the general said. He gave his brother a farewell letter to his wife, Valentina, and sent him to safety on the Volga's east bank.

Then Chuikov ordered a gun battery to destroy his headquarters should the Germans manage to overrun it.

### **HUMOUR KEPT SPIRITS UP**

Along the river, soldiers in the Soviet bunkers and trenches lived in the moment – their average life span was so short that nobody thought about tomorrow. Divisions containing thousands of men were often reduced to just a few hundred within a few days of fighting.

Small rituals sprang up among the condemned soldiers. One would point to one of his pockets, point to



*Many Soviet soldiers were awarded the "For the Defence of Stalingrad" medal.*

**"No man will shift us from this spot"**

*Hitler in a speech to Berliners on 30th September 1942*



# “[It was] as if we had dropped toy torpedoes instead of bombs”

Stuka commander Hozzel on the German bombers' ineffectiveness

a friend's pocket and say, “Swap without looking!” Soldiers swapped the contents: they might get a watch or cigarettes – or nothing. These kinds of games helped keep soldiers' spirits up, even though their lives might be measured in minutes.

On the opposite side of the front line, Hofmann described the situation perfectly for all combatants:

“In Stalingrad, anyone can die at any moment.”

The 62nd Army's doctors and nurses battled around the clock to save wounded soldiers, but had difficulty getting them evacuated to the east bank. In some cases, severely wounded soldiers were sent down the Volga on rafts in the vain hope that others would take care of them.

While the battle continued through October, snipers became one of the Soviets' main weapons. Soldier Alexander Kalentiev gained permission to go into battle on his own. As a child he'd been a capable shooter, and now he planned to “go to the frontline with my rifle and hunt for Fritzes”, as he told his division's newspaper.

Kalentiev found good observation posts among the ruins, where he laid patiently in wait, and within a few days he had shot 10 Germans. His account spread and inspired other Soviet soldiers to follow him.

They likened their actions to a bank account – and snipers opened their account “of revenge” by killing a German. Chuikov quickly saw the potential and encouraged his men to follow suit: “It will make every German feel he is living under the barrel of a gun.” The army newspaper regularly saluted the most proficient snipers, while the Germans employed their own sharpshooters, and the hidden snipers fought a merciless duel among the ruins.

## COUNTEROFFENSIVE BROKE THE GERMANS

October drew to a close without the Germans managing to make the final breakthrough, and the mental balance of power began to tilt. The weary soldiers in Paulus' 6th Army gradually lost the belief that they would crush the last resistance. A Soviet officer noted how the German soldiers' habits were changing. Previously they had made sure to wash and shave, even when fighting was the hardest, but now they had started to look dirty and broken. Their attacks also decreased in strength.

As a kind of apathetic calm fell over Stalingrad, the battle's finale would be fought outside the city.

The Soviet army had collected a reserve of a million men, and on 19th November 1942 they threw themselves forward. Huge armoured forces broke through the front to the north and south of Stalingrad, and after a few days they met up behind the 6th Army. The hitherto mighty German besiegers were now the besieged.

*Soldiers quickly learned to keep their heads down when creeping through the trenches dug into the ruins of the city.*



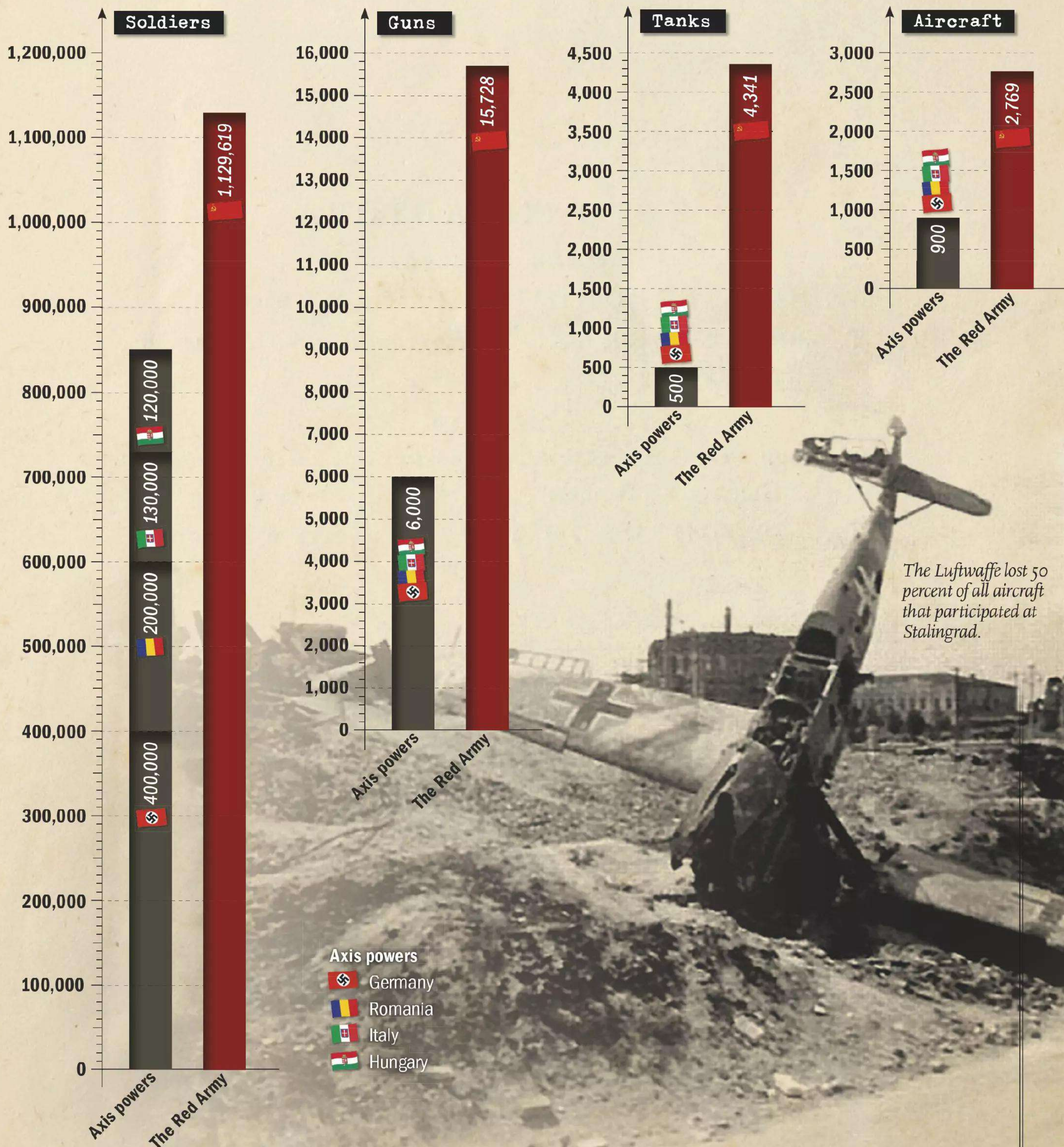
# Losses broke the German Army

The Red Army bore the greater cost for its defence of Stalingrad. But Stalin had abundant reserves of fresh troops and new equipment. Hitler's losses were crushing because the Germans were unable to bring in reinforcements. The defeat at Stalingrad ended his dream of occupying the Soviet Union.

The Axis forces in Stalingrad were an alliance of four countries: Germany, Romania, Hungary and Italy. Around half of those killed were Germans. In addition to their soldiers, the Axis also lost

guns, tanks, vehicles, small arms and ammunition. Another serious blow was the consumption of fuel, particularly for those aircraft that took part in the vain attempt to capture the city.

## Total losses at Stalingrad





• THE GERMAN NIGHTMARE •

# HITLER'S ARMY LOST IT ALL AT STALINGRAD

In early January 1943, the Soviets launched a major offensive at Stalingrad. The goal was to crush the remnants of Hitler's besieged 6th Army. For the next 20 days, the German soldiers fought a futile battle against a vengeful enemy.

1943

10<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY

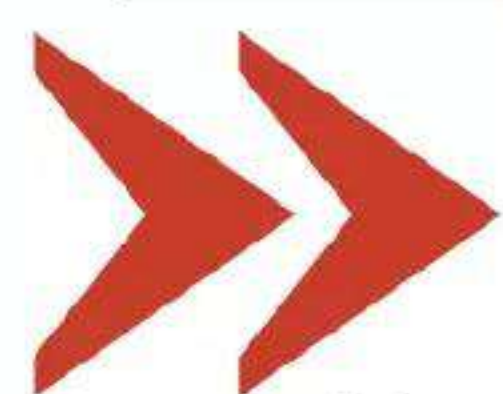


*Cold, starvation and  
disease killed many  
Germans during the long  
march to Siberia.*





## THE STAGE IS SET



In January 1943, the German army is helplessly stuck at Stalingrad. General Friedrich Paulus and his 6th Army have been trying since the previous autumn to capture the city, which has great symbolic significance for Adolf Hitler, but now the Soviets have taken the initiative and are ready to mount a decisive counterattack.



ONE OF THE GREATEST BATTLES IN HISTORY HAD already been raging for several months by early January 1943, when the Soviet forces at Stalingrad launched their assault against the remains of the German 6th Army, who were surrounded in the city. The situation was dire for the besieged troops, but German dictator Adolf Hitler had no intention of abandoning the city that bore the name of his enemy, the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. As a result, the last convulsions of the battered German army would take place in the bitter cold of a Russian winter, fighting for a city that was already a smoking ruin.

#### FRONT LINE NEAR STALINGRAD, 10TH JANUARY 1943

**The German 6th Army has been surrounded for two months, but the Red Army has not been idle: it has secretly mustered 200,000 reinforcements that will now crush the enemy.**

After a few quiet days, hell broke loose on the steppes west of Stalingrad. At 08.05 on 10th January 1943, as a snowstorm raged over the desolate landscape, the massed Soviet artillery – nicknamed Stalin's organs – coughed fiery missiles into the sky and ripped apart the morning's silence.

In the German trenches, soldiers huddled together as the Soviet bombardment continued for the next 55 minutes. Each shell hurled earth and lethal metal shards through the

air. The attack was so intense that a Soviet artillery officer noted with grim satisfaction that "There are only two ways to escape from an onslaught of this character – either death or insanity." German General Alexander Edler von Daniels nonchalantly described the day as "a very unpeaceful Sunday", but the Soviet's assessment was closer to the truth.

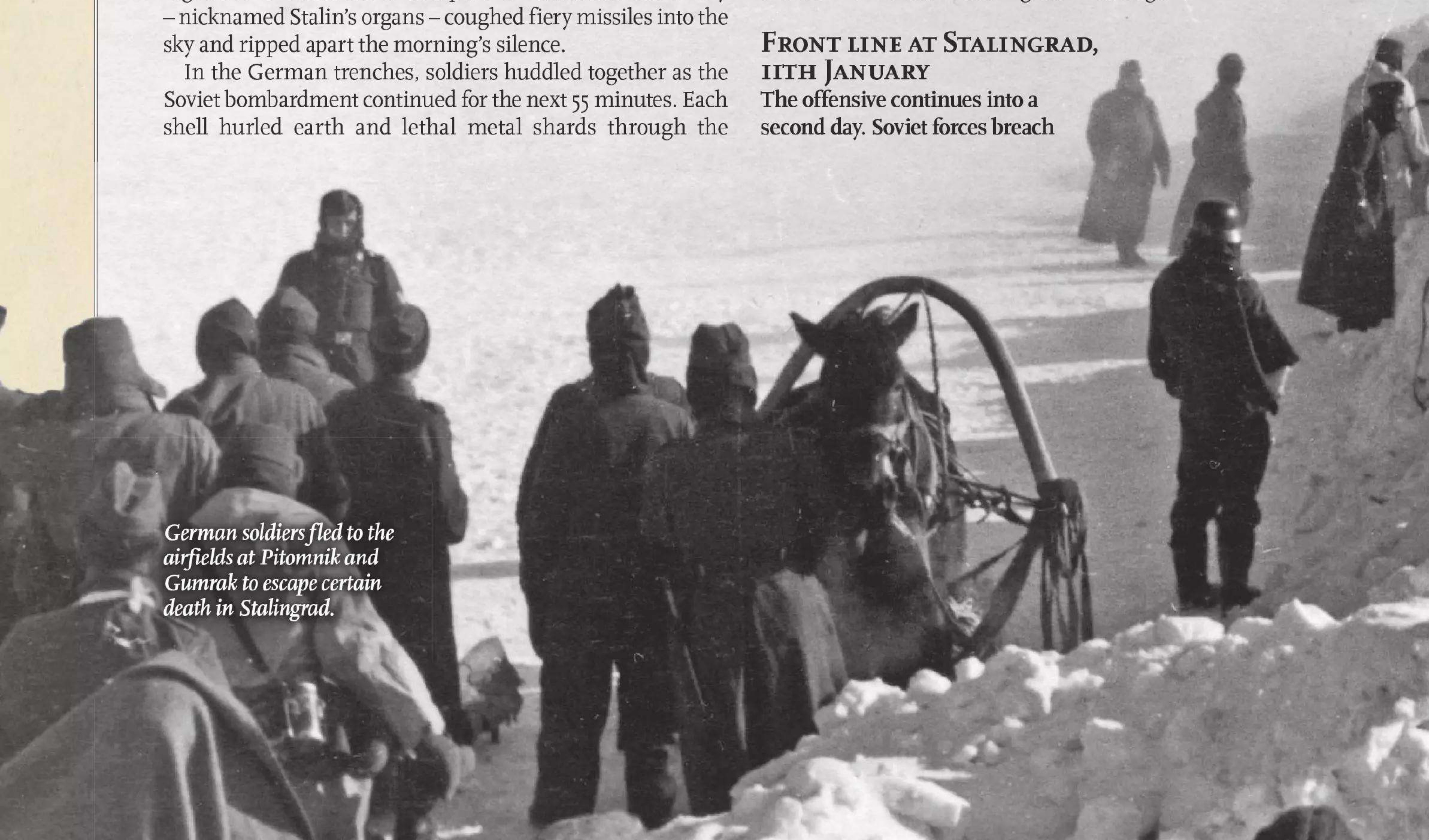
The frost made it too hard to dig deep trenches, especially for German troops exhausted after weeks on a daily diet of watery soup and a few slices of bread. They also lacked ammunition and their heavy guns were too far away to help.

At exactly 09.00, the Soviet guns' thunder was replaced by the ominous rumble of diesel engines. The ground shook as hundreds of tonnes' worth of heavy Soviet T-34 tanks advanced towards the shattered German positions. In their wake followed thousands of Soviet soldiers dressed in snow-white uniforms with fixed bayonets on their assault rifles. With loud cheers and to the strains of the Communist anthem 'Internationale', the living wall marched towards the dispirited German defenders. Operation Ring – the defeat of the German forces in Stalingrad – had begun.

#### FRONT LINE AT STALINGRAD, 11TH JANUARY

**The offensive continues into a second day. Soviet forces breach**

*German soldiers fled to the airfields at Pitomnik and Gumrak to escape certain death in Stalingrad.*





the German defensive lines along large sections of the front.

The German forces were expecting the Soviet attack: two days earlier, the Soviet commander-in-chief, Georgy Zhukov, had given the 6th Army its final warning. From crackling loudspeakers erected along the front and in tens of thousands of flyers airdropped over the German troops, the Soviets issued an ultimatum: surrender or be annihilated. The message promised fair treatment, food and medical treatment for all prisoners of war. The alternative was "that the Red Army troops and the Red Air Force will be compelled to take steps to wipe out the surrounded German troops". Paulus's response was a resounding no.

As a result, no one in the German army had been in any doubt that an attack was imminent. But the Germans were still unable to hold their defensive lines once the Red Army launched its offensive. Where the frozen soil had made the construction of usable trenches impossible, the German troops had been using the frozen corpses of fallen comrades and dead Soviets as cover. But the stiff bodies were no defence against tanks and heavy artillery.

The Germans' only option was retreat, not towards their homeland and the relative security of the west, but further



*German soldiers received the Stalingrad Shield medal for their role at Stalingrad.*

east, into the tightening pocket of defence in Stalingrad itself.

### **FRONT LINE AT STALINGRAD, 13TH JANUARY**

**The Soviets' first target is the Pitomnik airfield, which houses most of the 6th Army's supply depots.**

For three days, Sergeant Günther Wallrawe led his division in an organised retreat. In -20°C temperatures and with the snow whipping at their frostbitten faces, his men repeatedly hacked makeshift defensive positions in the frozen ground, but each time, the Soviet forces broke through nearby. To avoid being surrounded, Wallrawe repeatedly ordered his men to fall back towards Pitomnik and Stalingrad. However, 12 kilometres west of the vital airfield, Wallrawe was ordered to halt his withdrawal at a nearby railway station.

The order was clear: the station must be defended to the last man. The young sergeant had long since given up any hope of survival when the Soviet stormtroopers attacked the railway station. A bullet ripped open his stomach during the first wave of the assault. Normally, such a wound would be fatal, but not at Stalingrad. Like so many other German soldiers, the sergeant was saved by his empty stomach,





which held far less acid than a full one. No corrosive gastric juices reach Wallrawe's vital organs. Severely wounded, the sergeant crawled to the field hospital in Pitomnik. A few hours later, he was flown out aboard one of the Luftwaffe's large transport planes.

#### PITOMNIK RUNWAY, 13TH JANUARY

Thousands of wounded head for Pitomnik, but only a few planes are now able to land and take off.

For Raimund Beyer, the situation was unreal. Two months earlier, the 39-year-old veteran was one of the last to be flown into the Stalingrad pocket. Now, he would be one of the last to leave it. Beyer lay on a stretcher near the runway with gunshot wounds in both his legs, watching in frustration as plane after plane took off without him. Twelve kilometres away, German soldiers were fighting with small arms to give the wounded time to escape.

Beyer spent a whole day in Pitomnik before finally being carried on to one of the waiting planes. Around him stood SS guards with machine guns, their job was to keep other wounded soldiers away.

The battle for a place on the last few departing planes was relentless, and several times machine guns were fired into the crowd of desperate soldiers. Only once his place on a plane was secure, did Beyer breathe a sigh of relief. A pilot, recognising him as a fellow Nuremburger, threw him a whole loaf of bread, but a corporal tore it out of his hands and greedily wolfed it all, ignoring the pleas of the other starving

soldiers. For Beyer, there was a kind of justice, however, when the corporal began screaming and writhing soon afterwards. His shrunk stomach couldn't take so much food at once and had burst. He was dead before they landed.

#### PITOMNIK AIRFIELD, 14TH JANUARY

The Germans are fighting to retain control of the two airfields at Pitomnik and Gumrak. They are the 6th Army's only route in and out of the Stalingrad pocket.

Pitomnik was in chaos. Hundreds of bandaged and bleeding men were fighting to get to the front of the long queues. The doctors, flanked by armed soldiers, sorted the wounded into

three categories. The most severely wounded were sent to the runway for immediate evacuation. Soldiers with frostbite and flesh wounds were dismissed back to the front, while men with bullet wounds in their right hand were dragged outside and executed. Such wounds were deemed to be self-inflicted by men desperate to escape the hell of Stalingrad – something

the German high command wouldn't tolerate.

For those who were prioritised for evacuation, a new battle began on the runway to secure a place on the planes. Those unable to walk had no chance to compete and lay helplessly on stretchers where they'd been left. Meanwhile, men on crutches and with their heads wrapped in bandages fought for places on the aircraft. The front line was now so close that shells from the Soviets' heavy guns regularly crashed down on the runway. Even those soldiers who made it on to the planes weren't sure to be saved.

The Luftwaffe planes were frequently overloaded with people and the additional weight made it difficult for the aircraft to climb steeply enough to avoid the Soviet air force a few kilometres away. Sometimes physics defeated the pilots' best efforts and the planes, in an almost-vertical position, stalled and began to fall. For the soldiers inside, the horror was short lived, as the doomed machines fell to the ground and exploded in an inferno of fire.

#### THE RUSSIAN STEPPES, EAST OF PITOMNIK, 15TH JANUARY

The Germans abandon the defence of Pitomnik. Wounded soldiers try to reach the field hospital at Gumrak airfield instead.

The wounded at Pitomnik were left to the Soviets as the Germans retreated to the smaller Gumrak airfield. Starving, wounded and dying men dragged themselves through the snow. Many marched on frostbitten feet that were wrapped in nothing more than rags. Frost had ripped open their lips and given their

## “Further defence futile... Army requests immediate capitulation”

General Friedrich Paulus's message to Hitler, 26th January 1943



*By January 1943, Hitler's soldiers in Stalingrad had lost their belief in German superiority and invincibility.*



*The Third Reich tried to give its people a belief in victory, despite the stalemate at Stalingrad. Newspapers referred to Hitler's "military genius".*



faces a waxy appearance. Men regularly fell to the ground, dead from exhaustion. Other soldiers stripped the corpses, working quickly to peel off the precious clothes before the cold froze them in place. The luckiest got boots, which could make the difference between life and death. After the frenzy, the men marched on, thrilled to have an extra layer of clothing.

### **WEST OF GUMRAK AIRFIELD, 19TH JANUARY**

**The pocket has shrunk to half its size in nine days. The 6th Army is being squeezed into an ever-tighter territory.**

For nine days, the Red Army repeatedly broke through the Germans' defensive lines. Often, the 6th Army abandoned its trenches without a fight, testament to the panicked retreat. The Red Army troops were left speechless by the huge pile of rifles, mortars and field guns left by the fleeing Germans.

Near Gumrak, the number of abandoned weapons was so enormous that the Soviet 64th Army couldn't find any free space to mount its own artillery. Normally, the Soviets had used captured positions to set up their pieces, but as the Red Army approached Stalingrad, every foxhole was overflowing with dead Germans.

### **GUMRAK, 22ND JANUARY**

**The once-disciplined German army is disintegrating. Officers resort to extreme measures to maintain a semblance of order.**

Inside Stalingrad, even Hitler's most loyal soldiers realised the truth: the 6th Army would soon be overrun by the Soviets. Gumrak would fall in a matter of hours, and every plane leaving the airfield could be the last. The hopeless situation caused discipline to disintegrate in the German army.

Even senior officers were now trying to cheat death by escaping. One young lieutenant colonel used a false order to board a plane. Thirty minutes later, he disembarked at a military airfield outside the pocket. His hope was that no one would discover his disappearance in the chaos around Gumrak, but when the officer's driver reported that the colonel had disappeared after being driven to Gumrak airfield, General Friedrich Paulus exploded with rage, demanding that the deserter be flown back for immediate execution. There was no space left on the plane for deserters, however, so he was shot where he had landed.

### **EAST OF GUMRAK, 22ND JANUARY**

**The Germans leave Gumrak in a hurry, abandoning Soviet POWs and their own wounded.**

When the Red Army approached a barbed-wire enclosure near Gumrak, it met an inhuman sight. In the open camp lay thousands of frozen corpses that had been

*In Stalingrad, Germans and Soviets fought from house to house. The battles among the ruins became some of the war's bloodiest.*





*During their panicked retreat, the Germans left tanks, artillery and even wounded comrades to the Soviets.*

stripped of everything. A small group of ragged men sat huddled together, trying to find shelter from the icy wind. The Soviets had stumbled upon a German prisoner of war camp that had once housed thousands of Red Army soldiers. Now, only 20 were alive, but they too died as soon as their rescuers fed them bread and sausage from their field rations.

A Soviet film crew filmed the skeletal corpses, and the images were later played to Soviet audiences in reports on the army's progress at Stalingrad.

Meanwhile, back at Gumrak, Soviet tanks rumbled across the runway. Hundreds of seriously injured Germans had

been left lying on stretchers at the field hospital at the airfield. Most were mercilessly crushed beneath the tanks' caterpillar tracks. The remainder were finished off by machine-gun fire.

### STALINGRAD, 24TH JANUARY

**After being cut off for almost two months, the German army is near starvation.**

Gumrak had collapsed, and with it any slim hopes the Germans had of survival. Daily rations were cut to 50 grams of bread and a cup of watery soup. On good days, a single pea or noodle floated around in the thin liquid. The siege had so far lasted almost two months and by the end of January, the 6th Army was nothing more than a wandering corps of living skeletons. Their bodies had lost every ounce of fat and every movement was unbearable torture. Even hardened veterans screamed in pain during marches. Paulus was forced to issue a ban on cannibalism, but it made little difference. It was the intense cold that prevented the soldiers from eating fallen men – at -20°C, the corpses were so hard that the soldiers couldn't carve up their former comrades. Even the hard-frozen horses lay untouched. It was only when engineering troops passed by with their two-man saws that the soldiers could scavenge the little meat remaining on the starved animals and obtain some much-needed protein.

### STALINGRAD FRONT LINE, 25TH JANUARY

**The Luftwaffe attempts to supply troops from the air. Every day it flies over Stalingrad, making airdrops of supplies.**

For the pilots aboard the heavy Focke-Wulf Condor cargo

## Luftwaffe tried to keep the army alive

Calculations show that the 6th Army would have needed around 500 tonnes of supplies a day to survive. The German air force was tasked with delivering them.

**A**s the ring closed around the 6th Army in November 1942, the Germans tried to launch a major air operation. Military experts estimated that the 200,000 besieged soldiers needed 500 tonnes of supplies each day. The Luftwaffe diverted planes from other fronts to help with the task, but it quickly proved unfeasible.

Even while the Germans still controlled the two airfields in Gumrak and Pitomnik, the Luftwaffe pilots only managed to

transport around 150 tonnes of food and ammunition per day. Soviet anti-aircraft wiped out transport planes. At the same time, the Red Army captured several German airfields to the west, forcing the pilots to fly from new sites further away from Stalingrad. After Gumrak's fall, the Luftwaffe's task became impossible, because there was nowhere to land. Everything had to be dropped by parachute, and supplies often fell into Soviet hands.

*By January, the 6th Army was almost out of fuel and the horses had been slaughtered. The remaining food and ammunition had to be dragged to the front by men with sledges.*



planes, the trips to Stalingrad were getting worse. Often they were forced to flee with Soviet Yak fighters on their tails. The Soviets also lined the routes the German pilots used to reach Stalingrad with anti-aircraft guns. The pilots changed their routes regularly, but the flak guns always followed. The Luftwaffe had been losing an average of five aircraft a day since mid-November.

Even those planes that made it past the Soviets' defences didn't help much. Soviet intelligence had broken the Germans' airdrop signalling code. When the heavy aircraft approached, the Soviets displayed red, green and yellow flares, signalling that the German pilots should drop their cargo. The Soviets confiscated tonnes of winter coats, boots, weapons and food in this way.

Even when the airdropped containers landed close to the Germans, the lack of organisation at the airfields supplying the troops rendered many useless. One German sergeant recounted how his division, filled with hope at receiving a container, opened it to discover it contained nothing but marjoram and black pepper. The sergeant dryly joked that perhaps they could blow it in their enemies' faces.

### PRISON CAMPS EAST OF STALINGRAD, 25TH JANUARY

Thousands of Germans desert or surrender. They are stripped of their boots and rations, then sent to concentration camps east of Stalingrad.

For the thousands who ended up in Soviet captivity, hell had only just begun. The Germans were gathered in large camps, which were usually just empty pieces of land surrounded by barbed-wire fences. Men lay on the frozen ground in tattered clothing. The luckiest still had worn-out boots; others tied fabric torn from the jackets of dead comrades around their feet in an attempt to protect them from the icy Siberian winds.

Despite their cold, hunger and weeping wounds, the prisoners' biggest torment was something else entirely: lice. The bodies of the soldiers too weak to resist were covered with the blood-sucking insects that left itchy, red bites all over the skin. According to Doctor Hans Dibold, who tended the dying in one camp, the layer of lice was so thick that the insects could be scooped up like flour from a barrel. The lice only left with the approach of death.

### STALINGRAD, 26TH JANUARY

The Soviets are just a few kilometres from German headquarters, which is in the basement of the five-storey department store Unimag.

In the crowded labyrinthine basement below the Unimag department store, General Friedrich Paulus sat behind a dark curtain. The increasingly apathetic commander of the German forces spent most of his day there, lying on his bed or restlessly pacing back and forth. Strategic decisions were left to his second-in-command, Major General Arthur Schmidt. When Paulus learned that the Soviets had broken through to the Volga and split the 6th Army in two, his last hope for rescue

vanished. He immediately sent a telegram to Berlin, requesting permission to surrender the 6th Army.

## "No"

Hitler's answer to General Friedrich Paulus's plea

The general's message was stark: "Troops without ammunition or food. Effective command no longer possible. 18,000 wounded without any supplies or dressings or drugs. Further defence senseless. Collapse inevitable. Army requests immediate permission to surrender in order to save lives of remaining troops."

Hitler's answer was no. The troops in Stalingrad were tying up a considerable number of the Soviets forces, which was buying time for other parts of the German army to establish a defensive line further west. The fall of Stalingrad would also be a public relations disaster for the Nazis, who were due to celebrate the tenth anniversary of their takeover with a magnificent ceremony in four days' time. Instead, soon afterwards, Hitler appointed Friedrich Paulus to the rank of field marshal with a reminder that no German field marshal had ever surrendered his army or himself. The message was clear: commit suicide or fight to the death.

### BERLIN, 30TH JANUARY

Despite Paulus's plea to surrender, the Führer refuses to give up Stalingrad. The city's capture chimes well with Nazi propaganda, which is aimed at the



*Meagre field rations became the norm for Hitler's soldiers at Stalingrad in January 1943.*





civilian population in Germany and its troops elsewhere on the front line.

Hermann Göring's voice crackled through wireless speakers across occupied Europe as well as in the ruins of Stalingrad itself. The corpulent head of the Luftwaffe spoke about the imminent fall of "Fortress Stalingrad", which would live on forever in the German psyche.

The soldiers in Stalingrad listened with equal parts anger, disbelief and laughter as the leader of the German air force spouted bombastic words in a tribute to Germany's heroes from the security of Berlin, 2,200 kilometres away.

"Every German will one day speak in solemn awe of this battle and will recall that in spite of everything the foundation of Germany's victory was laid here," Göring trumpeted. For the soldiers trapped inside Stalingrad, the speech was perversely comical: the fattest man in Germany was preaching bravery and perseverance to starving troops.

### PAULUS'S HEADQUARTERS, 31ST JANUARY

Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus agrees to peace talks at the Germans' headquarters.

As the two Soviet representatives walked down the hallways beneath the Unimag department store, an eerie silence began to spread. Not a word was uttered by the German soldiers. It was as if the Devil himself was marching through their midst. The two Soviets marched deeper into the maze until they finally reached their goal: a small, spartan room with a single desk and chair on a hard, concrete floor. Two walls were hung with maps, while a large swastika flag adorned the third. The Soviets were told to wait.

All was quiet as Paulus's deputy, Schmidt, entered the room. He was immaculately dressed in a neatly pressed uniform, freshly shaven and with water-combed hair. In short barked sentences, Schmidt explained that the newly promoted Paulus was too ill to attend, but that he himself had been given the authority to lead the peace negotiations.

Without further ceremony, the Soviet envoy handed over a demand for the Germans' unconditional capitulation. All fighting had to cease immediately. Following the ceasefire, German troops must gather at the Square of Fallen Heroes in the centre

of Stalingrad to lay down their arms.

Schmidt agreed to the terms and signed the documents, then the Soviets were ushered into Paulus's room. The general was anxiously pacing back and forth. His grey uniform jacket was unbuttoned.

After confirming his name, rank and the fact that he wasn't armed, the field marshal was escorted through the basement corridors of Unimag and outside into the winter sun. Like thousands of his men, he was headed for Soviet captivity.



*Unlike the poorly dressed Germans, the Soviets had proper winter clothing, such as ushanka headgear.*

### STALINGRAD, 2ND FEBRUARY

The battle for Stalingrad is over.

Viktor Konradenko, a journalist with the Red Army newspaper, looked towards the shattered city. Thousands upon thousands of German soldiers were marching out of the ruins, a giant snake of broken men laying their arms, one by one, on a growing mountain of weapons.

In front of the reporter, a young lieutenant fell to the ground, overcome by exhaustion. The journalist heard him crying out to his companion: "Peter! Peter!" The dying man's voice became weaker and weaker. His comrade didn't look back. He simply pulled up the collar of his jacket, pushed back his shoulders and continued forwards on bare feet. A 5,000-kilometre march towards the Siberian prison camps lay ahead.



*Not much remained of the city after the Soviets finally defeated the Germans at Stalingrad.*



# Most German prisoners died

By the time the battle was over, the Soviets had taken 91,000 Germans as prisoners of war. When they returned home from captivity in the 1950s, only around 6,000 had survived – almost 94 percent of prisoners taken at Stalingrad perished in the Soviet Union.

19TH NOVEMBER 1942

The German 6th Army had around

**300,000**

soldiers at Stalingrad.



18TH DECEMBER 1942

The Soviets reduced this army to

**230,000**

men in just one month.



24TH JANUARY 1943

That was whittled down to

**180,000**

men after the Soviets' January offensive.



1ST FEBRUARY 1943

The Soviets took a total of

**91,000**

German prisoners of war.



FEBRUARY 1943

Of the 91,000 prisoners of war

**33,000**

were marched to the prison camps



SPRING 1943

Of the 33,000 POWs, just

**18,000**

made it to the camps.



1950s

Fewer than

**6,000**

prisoners made it home.



= 5,000 men



• • GHETTO UPRISING • •

# JEWISH REVOLT WAS CRUSHED

The last remaining Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto knew they were going to die, but they refused to give up without a fight. In a desperate showdown, they took up arms against the Wehrmacht. Thanks to well-planned preparations, they managed to keep the mighty German Army at bay for an entire month.

1943

19<sup>TH</sup> APRIL





*Jews were forced out of  
their hiding places by any  
means possible and taken  
straight to Treblinka.*



## THE STAGE IS SET



In November 1940, German troops seal off the Jewish ghetto in the Polish capital, Warsaw. Over the next three years, they move 350,000 of the ghetto's inhabitants to concentration camps. When Heinrich Himmler orders the extermination of any remaining Jews in 1943, they are determined not to surrender without a fight.



**T**HE JEWISH GHETTO IN WARSAW was almost empty. But not entirely. Sixty thousand people were still left, and they were determined that it would cost the Nazis dearly to capture them. The Jews had been making preparations for a long time, and when the situation deteriorated, they were ready.

#### A FEW HOURS AFTER MIDNIGHT, 19TH APRIL 1943, WARSAW GHETTO

Two thousand German soldiers marched into the Jewish ghetto in the Polish capital. The head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, wanted the area cleared immediately.

At 02.00, the resistance fighter Marek Edelman was informed that German soldiers were on their way. The message didn't come as a surprise; the night before, Jewish guards had warned that German officers and Polish police were in the process of surrounding the ghetto.

For 23-year-old Edelman, the message was a call to action. He was in charge of one of a total of 22 fighting groups formed by the Jewish resistance movement, and just a few minutes after the signal, he gathered his men. Armed with

handguns, homemade grenades, and petrol bombs, the resistance fighters ran silently through the quiet night-time streets and into an empty five-storey building that had been transformed into a primitive fortress several days earlier.

The windows on the upper floors were already blocked with sandbags, and Edelman and his men began barricading the entrance to the street with heavy furniture. Throughout the ghetto, women and children fled into basements and underground bunkers with their hands full of food.

For several minutes, the cold cobbled streets teemed with life, but 15 minutes later, everyone was in place. An ominous silence descended over the streets around an area known as the Brushmakers' District in the moonlit ghetto.

#### EARLY MORNING, 19TH APRIL, INNER PART OF THE GHETTO

SS *oberführer* (senior leader) Ferdinand von Sammern-Frankenegg ordered his troops into the ghetto.

In groups of three or four, the soldiers walked silently through the streets. Slowly, the men gathered in larger units and moved further into the ghetto, which appeared ghostly in the





cold moonlight. The only sound the soldiers could hear was the echo of their own boots against the cobblestones.

The quiet didn't worry the German soldiers, however. After two months of intensive training, they were well prepared for the operation, which involved German elite units from the Waffen-SS, as well as Polish and Lithuanian support troops – a total of 2,000 men.

Around 06.00, the German troops reached the corner of Nalewki and Gesia streets, not far from the Brushmakers' District. Five-storey apartment blocks towered over the roads, with heavy wrought-iron balconies jutting out. Suddenly, the silence was shattered by a shot. A second later, bullets and hand grenades whistled down over the astonished Germans, who ran for their lives. Terrified, the men shouted, "*Die Juden haben Waffen!*" ("The Jews have weapons!")

The soldiers sought cover against the buildings' walls while being shelled from every balcony and window. The hail of bullets was so relentless that the Germans, squeezed up against the walls, didn't dare to pick up their wounded comrades, who were screaming for help.

Not far away, at the intersection of Mila and Zamenhofa streets, German units attempted to break through the Jewish barrage with a tank. But the vehicle stopped abruptly when it was hit by a petrol bomb. Helplessly, the soldiers watched while the tank and crew were engulfed in flames. When another armoured vehicle appeared, the same fate befell it. The Germans had had enough, and after less than an hour of fighting, Sammern-Frankenegg ordered their withdrawal. The oberführer had to leave 12 fallen soldiers on the streets.

### 07.30, 19TH APRIL, HOTEL BRISTOL, WARSAW

The Germans lost their first battle and withdrew from the ghetto. The soldiers awaited new orders.

Von Sammern-Frankenegg was frantic as he burst into the room of SS commander Jürgen Stroop at the >>



## MAREK EDELMAN

NAME

TITLE

JEWISH ACTIVIST

### Rebel leader continued to fight

Having escaped the Jewish ghetto, Marek Edelman joined the Polish resistance movement and took part in the Warsaw Uprising in the summer of 1944. After the war, he studied medicine, and until his death in 2009, he fought for democracy and human rights. Among other things, Edelman supported the trade union Solidarity and spoke on behalf of the Palestinians.



- > Wrote books about the uprising.
- > Received the Order of the White Eagle.

1919-2009



## JÜRGEN STROOP

NAME

TITLE

MAJOR GENERAL

### Commander showed no remorse

After the war, Jürgen Stroop was indicted by the Americans for murdering prisoners of war. He was sentenced to death, but had only contempt for the court, where he believed the judge to be Jewish. He was handed to the Poles, who also sentenced him to death for clearing the Jewish ghetto, among other crimes. Stroop was hanged without demonstrating any remorse.



- > Was wounded in World War I.
- > Renounced his Catholic faith.

1895-1952



The soldiers let the fires rage out of control – perhaps some Jews would be burned into the bargain.



Hotel Bristol in Warsaw. The attack in the ghetto had been planned by von Sammern-Frankennegg, and he was afraid of how Himmler would react when he heard that the Warsaw Jews, with handguns and homemade petrol bombs, had sent the German Army running.

Forty-seven-year-old Stroop looked on with contempt as he heard Frankennegg's account of the events. Stroop had served on the Eastern Front in the 3rd SS Panzer Division "Totenkopf", whose troops were notorious for brutality and fanaticism. He spoke coldly, slamming Frankennegg's proposal to get the Luftwaffe to raze the ghetto to the ground – it would be humiliating for the SS to ask for help in defeating a group of Jews.

The phone rang. Stroop had Heinrich Himmler on the line. The SS leader wanted an immediate report on the situation, and the news of the defeat drove Himmler to explode in rage. He ordered Frankennegg to be deposed and appointed the brutal Stroop to lead the operation instead. The orders were clear: the Jewish resistance could incite the Poles to revolt, too, so Stroop had to crush the ghetto uprising immediately.

The new commander wasted no time. Around noon, he ordered an attack where the Germans had met the strongest resistance – in Edelman's sector on

*The Germans controlled how much food went into the ghetto, leaving thousands to starve to death.*



*The ghetto had its own system of ration cards. This card for a child was found hidden after the war.*

the corner of Nalewki and Gesia. Well aware of the damage caused by the Jews' attack, the Germans concentrated on capturing one house at a time, taking advantage of the fact that they could shoot at the defenders from a distance, where the Jews' pistols and homemade rifles would be useless. But the rebels were fighting just as furiously for every single building.

For the past three months, the Jewish resistance movement had built an extensive network of escape routes connecting their positions around the ghetto. Sewers, basements and ladders

from rooftop to rooftop were used every single time the Germans managed to surround the resistance fighters.

As darkness descended, Stroop pulled his forces out of the ghetto. After eight hours of fierce fighting, the Germans had found nearly 600 Jews hidden in areas where the resistance had been forced out. In long lines, the prisoners were marched out to the transshipment point, from where they were sent to the Treblinka concentration camp that night.

#### **MORNING, 20TH APRIL, BRUSHMAKERS' DISTRICT**

**Stroop decided to attack the ghetto from another direction. The Germans began to direct their assault at the Brushmakers' District in the eastern part of the ghetto.**

Marek Edelman held his breath as German soldiers approached one of the entrances to the workshop where he'd been hiding. He followed their movements intently, and as the first German troops passed the spot where he'd buried an explosive device, he pressed the button. The explosion shattered the windows, and shortly after, Edelman could see the results: German soldiers lay dead and wounded. But the battle-hardened troops didn't allow themselves to be shaken, and swarmed into the workshop area, where they began a fierce firefight.

Soon after, four armoured vehicles with anti-aircraft guns appeared and began firing at the Jewish positions. The rebels managed to put one out of action with a hand grenade, but they couldn't defeat the other three. The heavy shelling enabled the Germans to storm several Jewish positions.

After a series of fierce melees, 80 resistance fighters were captured. And while Edelman and others fled the rooftops to new positions, those left behind fought furiously for every square metre.

#### **NOON, 22ND APRIL, BRUSHMAKERS' DISTRICT**

**After two days of fighting, news of the Jewish revolt spread around the world. Himmler ordered the uprising to be stopped immediately.**

The ghetto's Brushmakers' District looked like something out of a nightmare. For two days, the Germans had blown up building after building in order to hit the Jewish resistance fighters, who repeatedly attacked from the rooftops. Thick clouds of smoke billowed up from the ghetto, and



# The Jews fought until the end

The Warsaw Jews were barricaded inside an area that covered only two percent of the city. The fighting in April and May 1943 took place mainly in the northern part, around the brushmakers' district.



the streets were blocked by rubble. The resistance forced the Germans to change tactics: Stroop decided to burn out the Jews. Using flamethrowers, German soldiers set fire to entire neighbourhoods. Soon, the buildings were surrounded by roaring flames, and suffocating smoke filled the streets. The ferocious fire forced the Jews to flee the Brushmakers' District and head towards the centre of the ghetto. The heat was so intense that their clothes began to smoulder.

"The pavement melts under our feet into a black, gooey substance. Broken glass, littering every inch of the streets, is transformed into a sticky liquid in which our feet are caught. Our soles begin to burn from the heat on the stone pavement," wrote Edelman in his diary.

The resistance fighters managed to reach the centre of the ghetto, where they joined other groups. The many thousands of Jews – women and children in particular – who had hidden weren't so lucky. Hundreds perished in the flames. Even the roaring fires couldn't drown out the cries of despair. Trapped

by the flames, many Jews jumped out of windows. "We made sure that these, as well as the other Jews, were liquidated," wrote Stroop soberly in his daily report, where he documented the events with photos. The report was later sent to Berlin.

## 23RD APRIL, WARSAW GHETTO

On the fourth day of the uprising, the German Army leadership was convinced that all Jewish resistance had ceased. Jürgen Stroop observed the smoke from the fires with a satisfied expression. From his command post near the ghetto's old police station, he informed his men that the action would end that day. Units were ordered to search the ruins of the inner ghetto for hiding places.

But as the day progressed, the soldiers found a series of hidden bunkers. It dawned on Stroop that the Jews had built hideouts throughout the ghetto.

"We did not find out about all the bunkers and strongholds set up and equipped for the uprising until



*Stroop's troops systematically executed Jews, pulling them from their hiding places.*



after the start of the battle," he complained in his report, adding that the network of hiding places allowed Jews uninterrupted passage between the buildings.

With this discovery, Stroop realised that the uprising would be far more difficult to suppress than he'd thought.

#### **MORNING, 26TH APRIL, OUTSIDE THE GHETTO**

Thirty thousand Jews had been killed or captured, but the resistance continued unabated. The Poles now called the ghetto *Ghettograd*, after the battle of Stalingrad.

Outside the ghetto, the Jewish resistance fighter Benjamin Meed could see the flames licking up over the ghetto's rooftops. For several months, he'd been hiding in the ethnic

Polish part of Warsaw, from where he'd helped carry weapons to the resistance groups. In order not to arouse suspicion, he attended a church service on 26th April, not far from the ghetto. Along with other churchgoers, Meed watched the burning roofs on the other side of the wall. At regular intervals, they could hear screams.

"Look. Look. People are jumping from the roofs," Meed heard from the spectators, who had gathered after the service.

#### **26TH APRIL, WARSAW GHETTO**

**Resistance groups disbanded. They were no longer able to defend their positions.**

It was becoming increasingly difficult for the Jews to prevent the Germans from penetrating the central part of the ghetto. In his last message, Mordechai Anielewicz, the formal leader of the resistance movement, called on his people to fight to the death. "The scale of our losses...is enormous. Our last days are approaching. As long as we have weapons in our hands, however, we will continue to fight and resist," wrote the 24-year-old.

The fighting was now in the centre of the ghetto and here, too, the streets were on fire. The nauseating stench of burnt meat was spreading, black smoke hung heavy over



*The primitive, homemade weapons proved relatively effective up close.*



the neighbourhood, and the intense heat could be felt radiating from the red-hot brick walls. The fires were forcing both civilians and resistance fighters to seek refuge in the underground bunkers. However, most of them were located under houses in cellars, and because the fire was so fierce that buildings were burning to their foundations, the Jews were roasting in their enclosed hiding places. One of them described the situation:

"I sit with my mouth open...with the illusion and effort that [I am] inhaling air. One does not talk in the bunker. When one talks, it is even more difficult to breathe."

But no one dared to open the entrance hatch to let in fresh air. If the Germans discovered the bunker, all would be lost.

### MORNING, 29TH APRIL, WARSAW GHETTO

**The fighting had continued for 10 days and the Germans still hadn't quashed the uprising. The news of the Jews' battle was intolerable for the Nazis, who were humiliated daily in the Polish underground press and international newspapers.**

Stroop was furious. It had been almost a week since he'd told Himmler that the uprising was over, but the Jews still refused to surrender. Every day, his forces found new bunkers, but even when the Jews had no way to escape, it was impossible to get them to come out voluntarily. Instead, his troops repeatedly had to use flamethrowers to burn them to death.

Elsewhere, the bunker facilities were so extensive that the best option was to blow them and their stubborn occupants into the air. To locate hidden bunkers, the German soldiers promised the few Jews who had been captured that their lives would be spared if they revealed the hideouts' positions.

### EVENING, 30TH APRIL, SEWERS UNDER THE WARSAW GHETTO

**Several resistance fighters were ordered to break out of the ghetto via the sewers, after the Jewish leadership realised that it was only a matter of time before the last defences collapsed.** It was pitch black as the group of resistance fighters raised the heavy manhole cover. One by one, the Jews crawled down through the narrow entrance, from which a foul stench of urine and faeces rose.

At the head of the group crawled 20-year-old courier Reginka Fuden. She had followed the route through the sewers to the non-Jewish part of Warsaw several times and knew the way well. Fuden and her comrades had made an agreement with the communist resistance movement in Poland to help the Jews. The resistance movement had become aware of the extent of the Germans' aggression towards Jewish citizens and had promised to help as many Jews as possible to safety.

Groping in the dark, the large group moved along the narrow sewer pipes, struggling through the fetid water. Many of the tunnels were no more than 70 centimetres high, and the refugees had to bend down so much that the sewage touched their faces. In front of them, fat rats swam away in fear of the unfamiliar guests.

After what felt like hours, the group finally reached its goal: a manhole on the outskirts of Warsaw, a good distance from the ghetto. The men gently eased open the manhole cover. Not a sound was heard from the street. The refugees had imagined that Polish resistance fighters, armed to the teeth, would meet

them and take them to a safe place with weapons and food. "There was not a soul to be seen, the night was misty, hunger gnawed at our insides, and we are in the middle of the street," wrote Aaron Carmi, the group's leader.

Instead, the Jews had to find the house of a Polish resistance fighter themselves, where they spent the night. The following morning, a truck drove them to a forest about seven kilometres from Warsaw, where the communist partisan movement was based.

### MORNING, 8TH MAY, HIDEOUT OF THE JEWISH RESISTANCE MOVEMENT'S LEADERSHIP

**The Germans found the main Jewish bunkers in the northern part of the ghetto.**

The 300 Jews in the large bunker under 18 Mila Street looked at each other in horror. Outside, they could hear tinny laughter as a German officer repeated through a loudspeaker that the bunker was surrounded. Everyone had to surrender or they would be gassed immediately.

No one doubted that the Germans meant what they said. Some of the civilians, as well as the Jewish smugglers who had constructed the bunker, left the hideout with

## Jews were "resettled"

**In July 1942, the Nazis decided that all Jews in the Warsaw ghetto would be sent to their death in nearby concentration camps.**

**H**einrich Himmler, leader of the SS, announced in an official decree on 22nd July 1942 that all Jews in Warsaw had to be "resettled".

In reality, the Jews were simply transported 60 kilometres to the east to be killed in Treblinka. The first to be taken were random homeless people, but soon the Germans began systematically clearing entire properties. Every day, they sent up to 10,000 Jews to a transshipment point on the outskirts of the ghetto, where the prisoners were forced into train carriages.

In an attempt to dispel rumours of the gas chambers, the Germans produced fake postcards on which transported Jews spoke of their new lives. In just seven weeks – until September – the Germans deported 300,000 people. There were about 35,000 left that the Germans used as labour, as well as 25,000 who hid.



*Once the Jews were forced into cattle trucks, there was no longer any possibility of escape.*



their hands up. Outside, they were greeted by a large group of Germans, who pulled them up one by one with harsh commands.

Soon after, a suffocating gas filled the bunker's narrow passages. The 80 or so remaining resistance fighters tried to hold their breath so as not to be asphyxiated, while they frantically searched in vain for a way out that wasn't blocked by the Germans. Then, young Arie Wilner took his pistol, pointed it at his head and fired. Most of the others followed suit. One of the men first shot his mother, then his sister and finally himself. The suicides were doubly tragic, because a few minutes later, the last 30 remaining Jews found an exit that the Germans hadn't discovered.

That same evening, Marek Edelman decided to lead his surviving men out of the ghetto. The Germans had become aware that the Jews were using the sewers as escape routes, and were making random searches. In order not to be discovered, Edelman's men had to remain hiding in the same spot until they were sure that the coast was clear. "We waited 48 hours for the time to get out. Every minute someone else lost consciousness. Thirst was the worst handicap. Some even drank the thick, slimy sewer water," recalled Edelman.

Finally, at 10.00 on 10th May, the group got out. Two trucks arrived, driven by members of the Polish communist partisan



*Emanuel Ringelblum collected documents and records and buried them inside milk churns.*

army, and in broad daylight, the Jewish resistance fighters began to emerge from the sewer. Poles on the street stared in amazement. A few minutes later, the trucks drove away with the Jews in the back.

### NIGHT, 16TH MAY, JEWISH SYNAGOGUE IN THE GHETTO

**All resistance had been crushed. The Jewish uprising in Warsaw was over.**

SS brigade leader Jürgen Stroop looked with a satisfied smile at the synagogue towering up in front of him. The impressive building boasted columns at the entrance and a large tower from which visitors could look out over most of Warsaw. With a professional eye, Stroop observed engineering troops carefully rolling out cables and laying explosive charges. After 28 days of fighting – about as long as the German army had spent conquering Poland – the Jewish

uprising had finally been quashed. According to Stroop's own records, his soldiers had destroyed 631 bunkers, while 56,065 Jews were killed or taken prisoner.

At 20.15, the leader of the engineering troops announced that everything was ready.

"Heil Hitler!" Stroop shouted, then pressed the button. A huge explosion set the synagogue on fire. Satisfied, Stroop returned to headquarters to write up his report to Himmler.

"The operation ended on 16th May 1943 with the destruction of the Warsaw synagogue at 20.15," Stroop wrote, and concluded the report with a sober statement: "The Jewish quarter of Warsaw is no more."

*Desperate Jews preferred to jump to their death rather than be taken prisoner.*



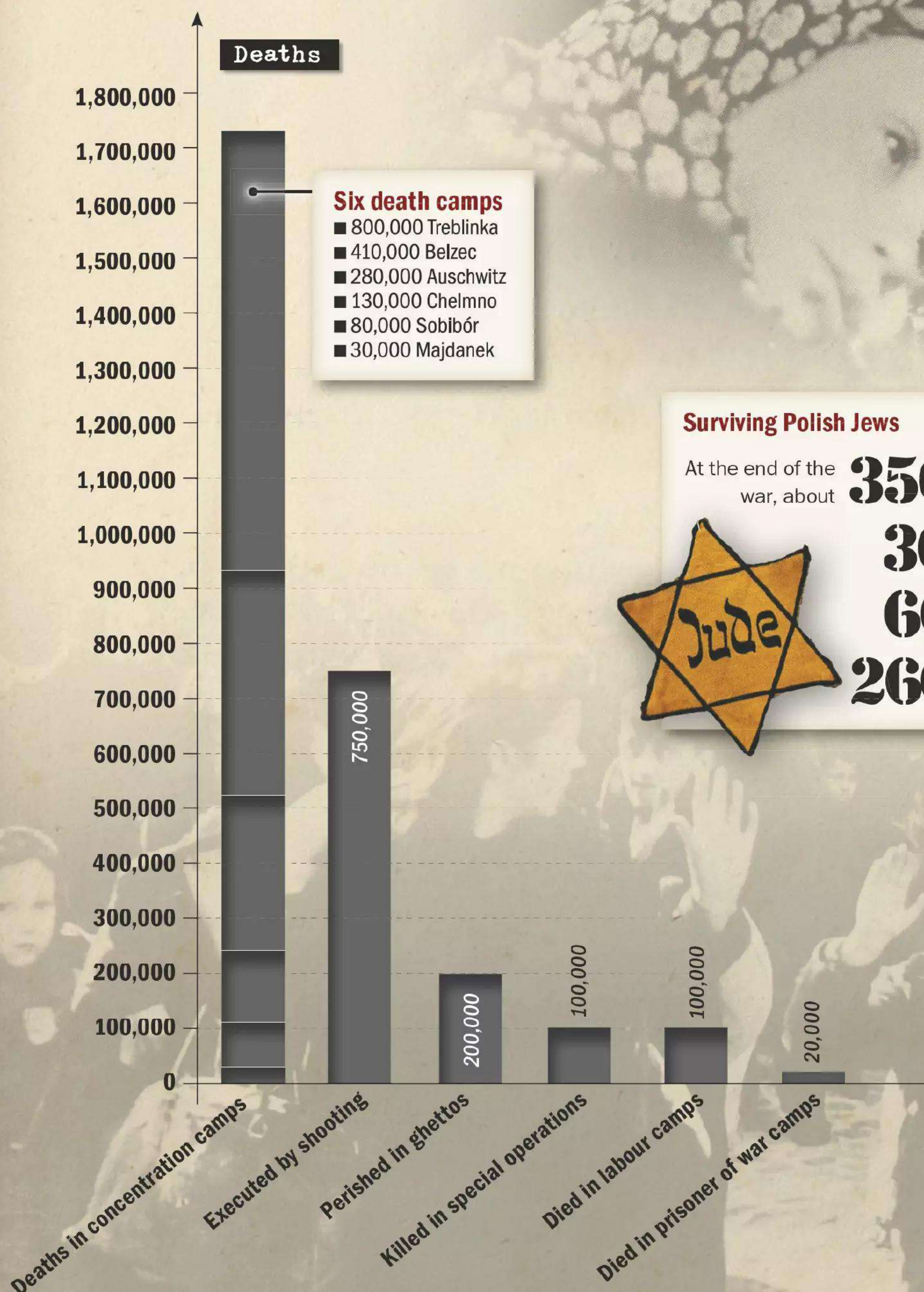
*The Jews were gathered in groups. If any tried to escape, they were shot on the spot.*



# Nine out of ten Polish Jews killed

Poland had Europe's largest Jewish population before the war, and only about 10 percent survived. Most were murdered in Nazi death camps, which were located in Poland, or shot by firing squads.

Jewish population in Poland before the war: 3,250,000



## Surviving Polish Jews

At the end of the war, about

**350,000**

Polish Jews had survived.

**30,000**

were liberated from concentration camps.

**60,000**

had hidden on Polish territory.

**260,000**

had fled to the Soviet Union.





*Backed by air support, German  
armoured forces advance forwards at  
full speed to the north and south of the  
Russian pocket around Kursk.*



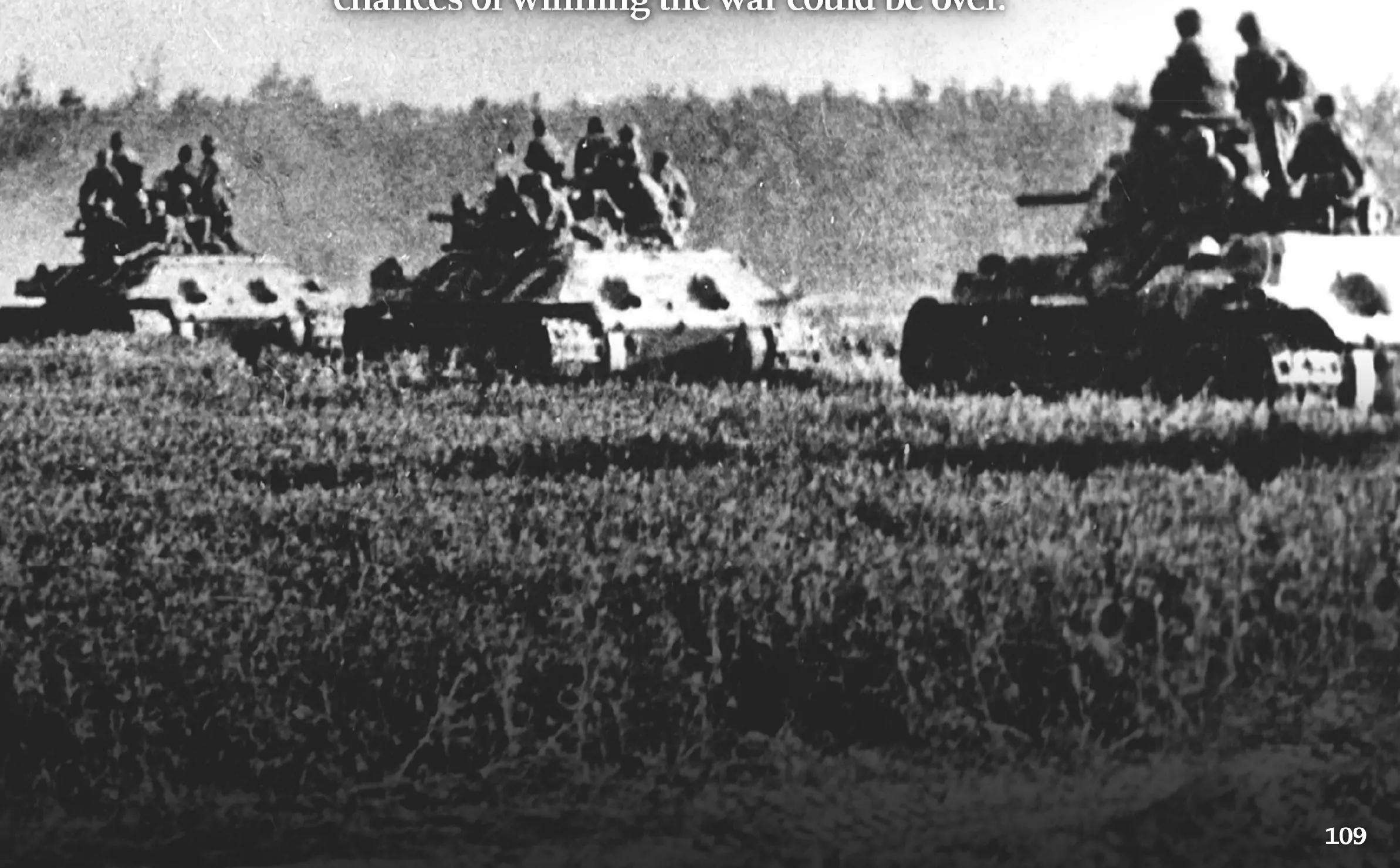
# 1943

12<sup>TH</sup> JULY



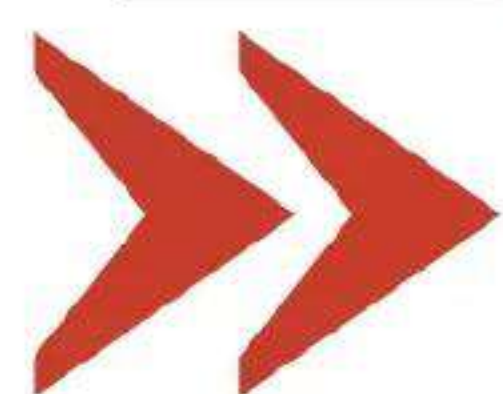
# HISTORY'S BIGGEST-EVER TANK BATTLE

In mid-1943, Hitler attempted to halt the Russian advance on the Eastern Front by committing his forces to a huge tank battle near the Russian city of Kursk. But his generals were worried. If Hitler's major offensive failed, the Third Reich's chances of winning the war could be over.





## THE STAGE IS SET



The Wehrmacht has hit a brick wall in Russia in 1943. But now a massive attack against the Red Army at Kursk is planned to regain the initiative. After two years of war, though, the Soviets have learned their lesson. They wait in well-prepared positions when, in July, Hitler directs his armoured forces towards them.



**A**N ARMOUR-PIERCING SHELL slammed into the side of Captain Erdmann Gabriel's tank and the ammunition store exploded. As flames poured from the vehicle, Gabriel managed to escape and peel off his burning clothes, having the presence of mind to remove his wedding ring before the burns caused his hands to swell. Luckily, the gunner escaped without any facial burns, and the driver and radio operator also tumbled from the tank's escape hatches before the fire consumed them. The gun loader wasn't so lucky, however; he died, trapped inside the burning steel monster.

Captain Gabriel and his crew belonged to Panzergrenadier Division Großdeutschland, which had been formed in the summer of 1943 and was now under fire from Soviet artillery in Nazi Germany's last major offensive on the Eastern Front. Gabriel survived the war and could share his experiences. Many other tank soldiers were not so lucky; they were killed by explosions, flames or shrapnel.

Eyewitnesses recounted burning, smoking and charred bodies hanging from the hatches, while tank crews told of the



German steel helmets protected against shrapnel but not gunshots.

horrific moment when they realised a shell had struck the tank's armour. A red-hot spot would start to glow on the inside of the tank carriage like an electric hob. If the crew was lucky, the shell would glance off the armour or explode without penetrating it, the red-hot spot fading as the armour cooled, but at other times, the shell would detonate and shatter the armour, hurling deadly splinters into the tank interior.

Großdeutschland was just one of many German divisions that participated in Hitler's last major offensive, Operation Citadel, which targeted the city of Kursk in July 1943. The attack force totalled 800,000 men, 2,500 tanks and mobile artillery, plus 1,800 aircraft. Yet despite the German offensive's strength, it was still up against a much larger foe. At the front around the Russian city, the Red Army numbered 1.3 million men, 3,500 tanks and mobile artillery, plus 3,400 aircraft. In addition, Russian reserve troops were lined up behind them, ready for deployment at short notice. The Germans possessed no reserves, throwing in everything in the hope of regaining the initiative on the Eastern Front with one fierce blow.

## SPY REVEALED GERMAN BATTLE PLAN

The offensive followed what had been a disastrous winter for the Germans in Russia. The 6th Army – comprising 250,000 men – had been surrounded in the city of Stalingrad in southern Russia. Over 150,000 had been killed during the battle, while 91,000 were taken prisoner. After the Battle of Stalingrad, the German armies had been pushed out of southern Russia, and a new front was formed further west, around the border with the Ukraine. The Germans were in retreat.

After the winter setbacks, the Eastern Front now ran in a fairly straight line from Leningrad in the north to the Black Sea in the south. But around Kursk, the Soviet front line had expanded by around 100



## Focke-Wulf Fw 190 A-4

Length	8.8 metres
Wingspan	10.5 metres
Weight (max)	4.4 tonnes
Top speed	605 km/h
Crew	1

## GERMAN FIGHTER PAVED THE WAY FOR ARMoured VEHICLES

The Focke-Wulf Fw 190 A-4 was the Germans' second-best fighter after the Messerschmitt 109. During the Battle of Kursk, a custom-built model took part, built to carry bombs and fitted with metal plates to protect it from enemy fire. The aircraft could therefore be used as a fighter-bomber. When the Germans launched the offensive at Prokhorovka, the Focke-Wulf led the way.




## Ilyushin Il-2

Length	11 metres
Wingspan	14.6 metres
Weight (max)	6.4 tonnes
Top speed	404 km/h
Crew	2

## SOVIET AIRCRAFT SHOT TANKS WITH MACHINE GUNS

The best Soviet aircraft during the Battle of Kursk was the Ilyushin Il-2. The bullets from its 37-mm machine guns were so strong that they could penetrate a tank's armour and put it out of action by, for example, hitting the engine. The plane carried a two-man crew: a pilot, and a gunner with a machine gun that could shoot down fighters who took up pursuit. The Ilyushin Il-2 was also heavily armoured.





*Shells rained down on the German tanks and infantry as they advanced towards Kursk.*

kilometres into German-occupied areas. This bulge-shaped area was held by tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers that Hitler planned to cut off. He ordered his generals to carry out a pincer movement, where one German army from the north and another from the south would surround the Soviet troops in the bulge, and pinch it off like a pair of pliers clamping the head of a nail.

Earlier in the war, the Germans had enjoyed great success with lightning attacks and pincer movements. But by 1943, the Red Army was wise to the manoeuvre, so when German troops began to gather in large numbers north and south of the bulge, Soviet generals were prepared for such an attack.

A spy had warned the Soviets about Hitler's summer offensive, code-named Operation Citadel. The Red Army was fully prepared for a defensive battle at Kursk. Soldiers built trenches, laid out minefields and prepared tank traps in the form of deep trenches and hidden gun emplacements. The only thing the Soviets didn't know was exactly when the attack

would happen. This was due in part to Hitler repeatedly postponing the offensive's date. His reasons included waiting for arms factories to finish building new types of tanks with thicker armour and more powerful guns.

Hitler also delayed the attack because he was nervous. The Führer was counting on Operation Citadel inflicting a significant defeat on the Soviets that would prevent the Red Army from carrying out any offensive manoeuvres later that summer. It would allow German forces to stabilise the Eastern Front that summer and over the following winter. He would then be able to release forces to counter a possible US and British landing operation in southern or western Europe.

#### **BATTLE OPENED WITH ARTILLERY**

Early in the morning of 5th July 1943, thousands of German guns opened fire to soften Russian defences and pave the way for their attack. The shelling was accompanied by the rumble of hundreds of tanks warming up their

**“T-34 after T-34 rolled over the hill, right into the middle of our infantry positions.”**

Hubert Neuzert, German anti-tank soldier



# Germans were slowed down

The Germans advanced towards the strategically important railway town of Prokhorovka in 600 tanks, supported by fighters and bombers. But the Russians smelled a rat, and stood ready with 900 tanks and prepared defences. The world's largest tank battle had begun.



## 1 Luftwaffe bombs

At 08.30, German planes bomb the Soviet positions around Prokhorovka. Many Soviet tanks are destroyed, but the 5th Guards Tank Army's commander Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov has ample reserves. The usually effective aircraft fail to exert a decisive influence on the battle.

*Soviet infantry tried to take on the German tanks with portable mines and grenades.*



## 2 The battle begins

Soviet tanks rumble out from their camouflaged positions in ravines and bushes. At high speed, they move in between the German tanks to get close enough to improve their chances of penetrating the heavy tanks' thicker armour with their shells.

## 3 Fighting ends in chaos

The two armies fight a frenetic, chaotic battle, where tanks often fire at each other from almost point-blank range. Commanders lose track of proceedings, and each tank is on its own. The Soviets try to surround the German tanks that choose to stop manoeuvring to give their gunners a better chance of targeting and destroying each Soviet tank one by one.

## 4 Battle is decided

Just before noon, the Soviet 5th and 33rd Guards Tank Armies overwhelm the German 3rd SS Panzer Division "Totenkopf" in the northern part of the battlefield. Here, the Battle of Kursk turns as the Red Army goes on the offensive, forcing the Germans to retreat.

## 5 Battles in the dark

To the south, the 2nd SS Panzer Division "Das Reich" battles the Soviets' 2nd Guards Tank Army throughout the entire day, and continues to fight on after darkness falls, despite the hopeless situation it finds itself in.

## 6 German defeat

The Germans never reach Prokhorovka. From this point on, the Wehrmacht is in constant retreat across the Eastern Front.







*The Red Army had 1.3 million men plus reserves at Kursk, giving it a clear advantage over the Germans, who only had 800,000 soldiers.*

engines in preparation for battle. The onslaught did inflict losses on the Soviets, but their artillery behind the front line was firing back, making their own inroads into German ranks. The Red Army was also protected by around one million mines running along its defensive lines, which slowed the German advance from both north and south. As German tanks and armoured personnel carriers crawled forward or ground to a halt in front of the minefields, the Russians could bombard them with large-calibre anti-tank rifles, field guns and grenade launchers.

When the artillery finally fell silent, the German mine-clearing, infantry and tank units made their move from both north and south. In the north, Army Group Centre's 9th Army under the command of Colonel General Walter Model had to travel 65 kilometres from the front at Orel to Kursk. Model's advance units hit trouble when military engineers were forced to clear the way through the minefields. By the evening, the 9th Army had only managed to advance five kilometres. Model had been cautious: he'd only allowed a limited number of tanks supported by anti-tank



*After the Soviets' success at Kursk, medals were produced to commemorate the battle.*

soldiers to advance, holding back other forces to test the Soviet lines of defence elsewhere to find their weak points.

To the south, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein did the exact opposite. He let his 700 tanks rumble forward from Belgorod along a broad front, with the infantry at their heels. The tactic provided enough firepower to allow the engineers to clear the minefields faster. Army Group South managed to break through Red Army defences and advance around 20 kilometres behind the line. But von Manstein's forces were still 80 kilometres from Kursk as night fell. One of Army Group South's main objectives on that first day had been to capture a bridge over the Psel river, which stood between them and Kursk. However, Soviet troops had resisted so fiercely that the

Germans remained well short of their objective by the time darkness fell.

#### GERMAN PROPAGANDA KEPT A LOW PROFILE

The next day, a communiqué from the Soviet Information Bureau reported: "This morning, 5th July, our troops in the

**"Our troops...engaged in heavy fighting with enemy infantry and tank forces"**

*Soviet press communiqué, 6th July 1943*





Orel-Kursk and Byelgorod directions engaged in heavy fighting with large enemy infantry and tank forces, which, supported by large numbers of aircraft, launched an offensive. All the enemy's attacks have been repulsed with heavy losses, and only in some places have small detachments of Germans succeeded in penetrating our defences to a slight degree."

The German propaganda machine also distributed news about the offensive to the press, but deliberately played down its importance and scope: "From a successful local attack of German infantry in the Belgorod sector and subsequent strong Soviet counter-attacks, fierce fighting on the ground and in the air developed in the course of yesterday which spread as far as the area north of Kursk and up to this hour has been assuming even greater violence."

German propaganda had learned its lesson from the Battle of Stalingrad, where it had trumpeted a German victory prematurely. That time, the battle had ended in a humiliating defeat that exposed the Nazi regime as untrustworthy and deceitful. This time, the propagandists kept open the possibility of writing off the whole battle as a local skirmish across an insignificantly small front. Therefore, very few German civilians knew that a crucial battle was in full swing, and that defeat would seriously weaken the German army in the East. Wehrmacht commanders were fully aware of the battle's importance, however. For example, General Heinz Guderian predicted that if the offensive ended in defeat, the German army would never recover.

Over the following days, the northern army advanced 15 kilometres beyond the original front, while the southern army pushed 35 kilometres in battles where thousands were killed. But the Battle of Kursk was being influenced by events elsewhere. On 10th July, US and British troops landed in southern Italy and engaged Italian and German defences, forcing them to retreat. For the first time during the war, Germany was fighting on two fronts >>



**PAUL HAUSSER**

NAME

TITLE SS GENERAL

### SS general received Knight's Cross

SS General Paul Hausser, who led the German armoured forces at Prokhorovka, received the Knight's Cross for bravery in 1941. A few days after the Battle of Kursk, he added "oak leaves" to the Knight's Cross. Hausser was nicknamed "Papa" because when he joined the SS, he was retired from the Reichswehr, and was then involved in creating the military wing of the Waffen-SS.



- > Participated in WWI and WWII.
- > Colonel general of Waffen-SS in 1944.

1880-1972



**PAVEL ROTMISTROV**

NAME

TITLE LIEUTENANT GENERAL

### Army chief was model Soviet

Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov spearheaded the Red Army's forces at Prokhorovka. He lost hundreds of tanks during the battle, but still ended up being awarded the Soviet Union's highest military order, Hero of the Soviet Union. Later, Rotmistrov fell out of favour temporarily when he lost another large number of tanks in Minsk in mid-1944.



- > Held rank of general until 1968.
- > Was Secretary of Defence after the war.

1901-1982



simultaneously. On 11th July, the Soviets went on the offensive. Two hundred kilometres north of the pocket, they spied an opportunity to break through German lines while the majority of German forces were tied up fighting at Kursk. That offensive forced the Germans to divert troops north to block them. Most reinforcements came from Model's army in the north, thus weakening his campaign. The Soviet move achieved its aim, and the northern part of the pincer movement lost momentum until the offensive petered out completely.

### PANZER ARMIES ADVANCED TOGETHER

The following day – 12th July – the battle continued unaffected to the south of Kursk. Here, von Manstein and his forces were still trying to break through. That morning, the Luftwaffe bombed Soviet positions around the town of Prokhorovka, a key step towards the operation's target. After the air strike, the II SS Panzer Corps under the command of SS-Gruppenführer

Paul Hausser drove forward in a series of wedge formations with Tiger heavy tanks at their head. Tigers were far superior to the standard Soviet T-34 tank in both armour and firepower. A Tiger could hit targets up to 1,500 metres away, while the T-34's range was limited to just 500 metres in turn when it came to disabling Tigers. The II SS Panzer Corps possessed around 80 Tiger tanks. The other 520 tanks were older, lighter models – more comparable to the T-34, making them easier targets.

The surrounding area shook as 600 German tanks rumbled forward through the cornfields and grasslands that covered the hilly terrain outside Prokhorovka. Behind them, thousands of infantry troops followed. The soldiers were instructed to occupy houses and buildings, using hand

## TANKS

# Two contrasting tanks fought battle

A tank needed to be well armoured, move swiftly, have a gun able to hit faraway targets, and travel a long distance on a single tank of fuel. In the battle of Kursk, two types of tanks played lead roles.



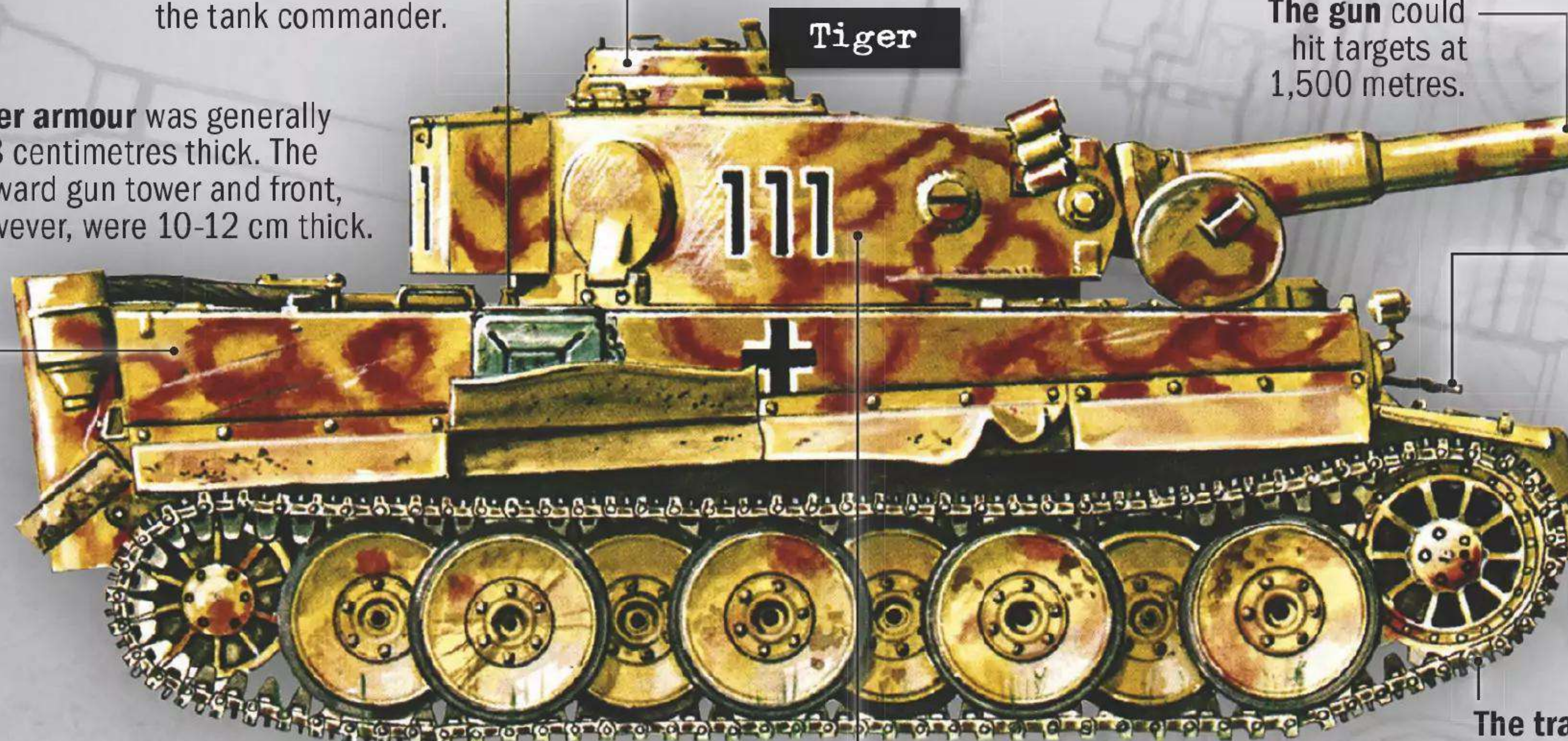
## Superb but vulnerable

The Tiger possessed huge firepower and strong armour but was relatively slow and heavy on fuel. Its thick armour was almost impenetrable, and the long gun barrel could fire shells further than the enemy. The Tiger rolled for the first time in 1942 and was feared by the Allies for the rest of the war.

■ <b>Weight</b> .....	57 tonnes
■ <b>Engine</b> .....	700 hp
■ <b>Gun</b> .....	88 mm
■ <b>Top speed</b> .....	38 km/h
■ <b>Range</b> .....	140 km
■ <b>Crew</b> .....	5 men

Command turret for the tank commander.

**Tiger armour** was generally 6-8 centimetres thick. The forward gun tower and front, however, were 10-12 cm thick.



Tiger

The gun could hit targets at 1,500 metres.

The machine gun was manned by the gunner, who served double duty as the tank's radio operator.

The gun turret weighed 11 tonnes and took a full minute to turn 360 degrees.

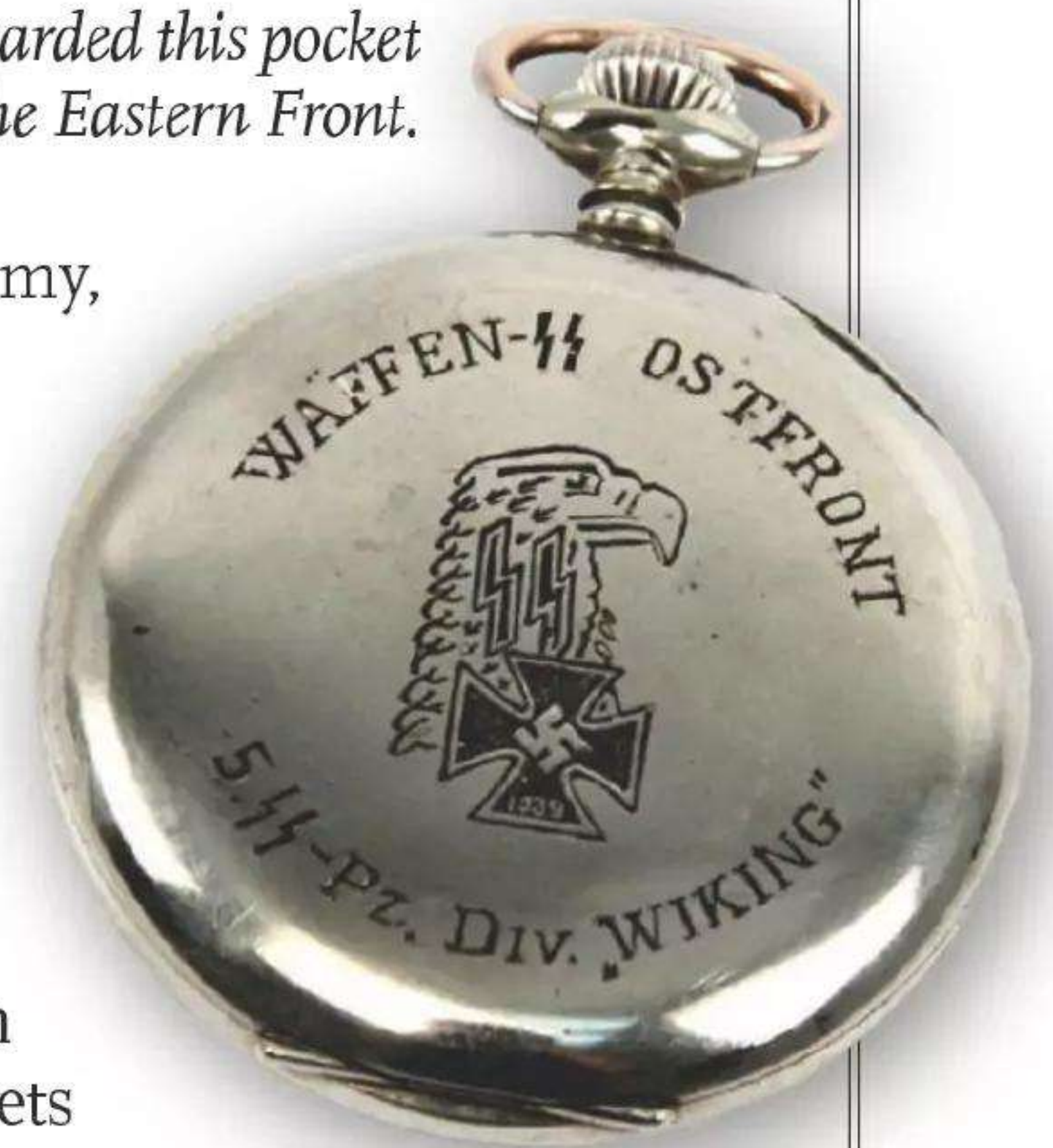
The tracks measured 72.5 centimetres wide. This ensured that the heavy tank didn't get stuck driving through mud, for example.



*The Tiger's thick armour provided good protection but its heavy weight often caused it to break down.*



The 5th SS Panzer Division was awarded this pocket watch to mark the fighting on the Eastern Front.



grenades and portable mines to keep the Soviet foot soldiers away from German tanks. But the Red Army had no intention of giving up Prokhorovka. Around 900 Soviet tanks emerged from their hiding places behind bushes or inside ravines to roll over the hills. According to German eyewitnesses, it was a terrifying sight: "Racing at full speed and firing from all barrels, T-34 after T-34 rolled over the hill, right into the middle of our infantry positions. We opened fire," recounted German anti-tank soldier Hubert Neuzert.

Although the Germans posed a formidable foe with 80 Tigers and 520 other tanks, the 900 Soviet T-34s were an overwhelming force. They deliberately attacked at full speed to get as close to the Tigers as possible. These tactics ensured they'd avoid becoming sitting ducks for the Tigers' long-range guns. It meant tanks fired at each other from no more than a few hundred metres' distance, and sometimes at point-blank range. Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov, commanding

the Soviet 5th Guards Tank Army, described the battle as chaotic:

"The shells fired at close range pierced not only the side armour but also the frontal armour of the fighting vehicles. At such range, there was no protection in armour and the length of the gun barrels was no longer decisive. Frequently, when a tank was hit, its ammunition and fuel blew up and the torn-off turrets were flung through the air over dozens of yards. On the black, scorched earth, the gutted tanks burnt like torches. It was difficult to establish which side was attacking and which was defending."

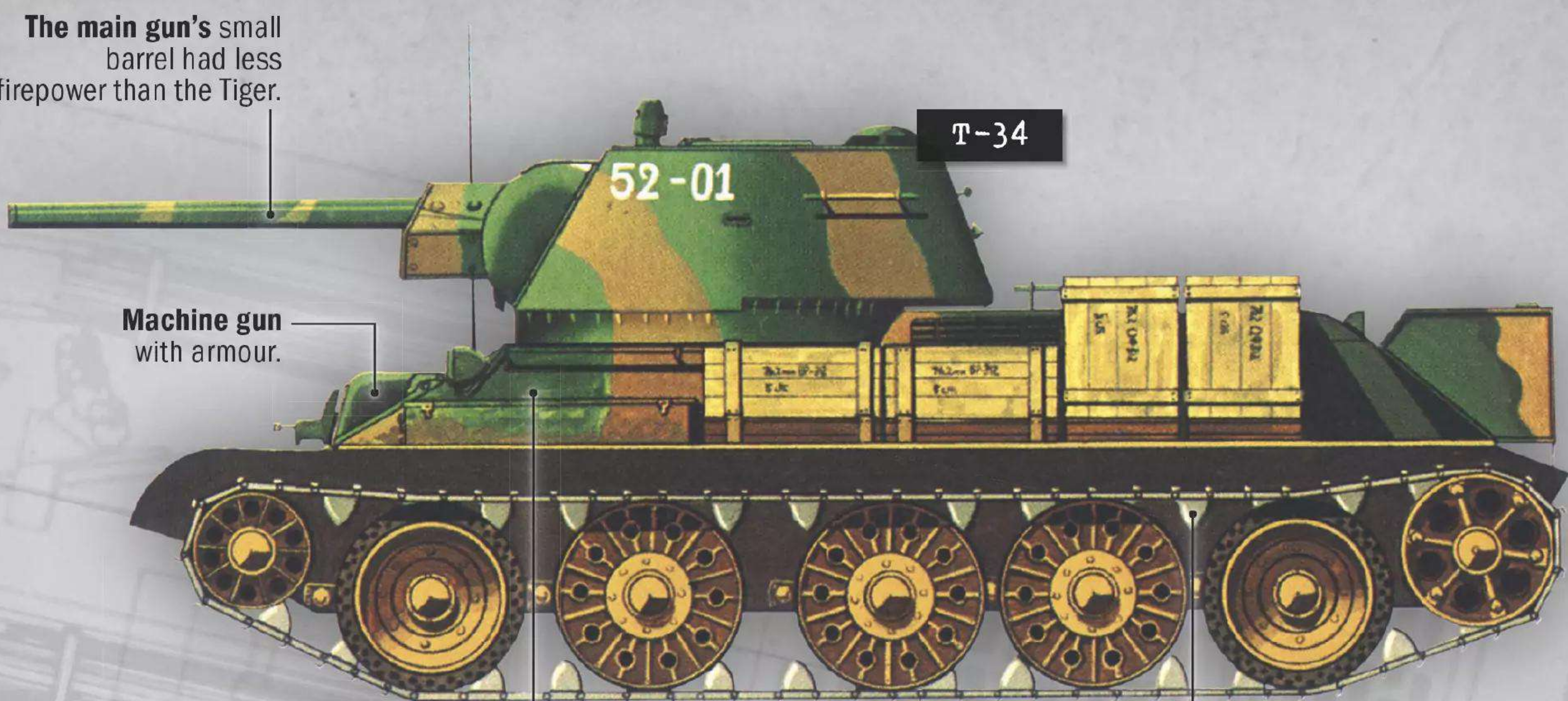
Military historians disagree over the exact number of tanks destroyed at Prokhorovka, but German losses

The main gun's small barrel had less firepower than the Tiger.

Machine gun with armour.

Armour-plating was 2-7 centimetres thick, so much thinner than the Tiger. But the T-34 was half the weight.

Wide tracks and the vehicle's low weight helped the tank when driving in deep mud and snow.



## Primitive but effective

The Soviet T-34 was well armoured and drove fast and far on a single tank of fuel. In contrast, it lacked firepower. Until the Tiger's debut in WWII, the Red Army's T-34 was the world's best-armoured vehicle. The Soviets had realised that a tank's armour should be curved, so enemy shells rebounded off without doing any harm. The principle was later copied by the Germans.

■ Weight	28 tonnes
■ Engine	500 hp
■ Gun	76.2 mm
■ Top speed	55 km/h
■ Range	400 km
■ Crew	4 men



The T-34 was technically inferior to the Tiger but that made it easier for the crew to repair in the field.



# “Fierce fighting on the ground and in the air [has] developed.”

German propaganda reporting the beginning of the Battle of Kursk

were probably around 200, including around 30 Tigers, while the Soviets lost 500. The disparity was down to the fact the German tanks were both technologically superior and crewed by more skilled personnel. Each German tank had its own radio, too, while the Soviets only fitted radios to their lead vehicles. This gave German commanders far better control of their units, enabling them to co-ordinate defence and attack more effectively than the Soviets, who bumbled forward haphazardly, taking any opportunities that arose. German crews were also better trained, able to aim more precisely and thus make more direct hits.

The Soviet tactic of mass attacks was also costly, because the Germans merely needed to fire at the mass of tanks to make an impact. A German tank could easily take out two or three T-34s before it was hit. Historians estimate that approximately

700 tanks were destroyed during the Battle of Prokhorovka, which would make it the largest tank battle ever. But casualty figures are unclear because both sides underestimated their own losses while exaggerating their victories. In addition, troops often misreported tank losses, reporting tanks as lost despite the fact they remained operational after being hit. Often, minor damage was repaired quickly by either crews or mechanics at the front, after which the tanks returned to action. A tank could easily be counted as lost two or three times before it was finally destroyed.

## GERMANS WON A HOLLOW VICTORY

As darkness fell, the battle petered out. Technically, it counted as a German victory based on the number of destroyed tanks. But it came at a huge cost – for the Germans, any destroyed

tank was a major setback because the arms factories could no longer produce enough tanks to make up for the losses at the front, never mind the fact they were far from the Eastern Front battlefields.

The Germans had invested in tanks with high technical specifications, while the Russians focused on mass-producing T-34s.

In 1943, the T-34 may have been far more primitive than German Tiger and Panther models, but it had one major advantage: it was proven technology, both reliable and easy to repair, thanks to its simple engine, gearbox and tracks. The German Tigers and Panthers were far more complicated machines, requiring much more in the way of maintenance and repair – the engines often broke down under the heavy armour, for example.

The Soviets could easily sacrifice 500 tanks at Prokhorovka because they had so many in reserve. The Germans couldn't afford their losses, so in reality, the Wehrmacht was the loser. On 13th July, the Russians launched another offensive around 300 kilometres south of Kursk, placing Germany's Army Group South under severe pressure in both Russia and the Ukraine. At the same time, they launched a series of smaller operations to the north of Kursk.

To make matters worse, the Allies were pushing forwards in southern Italy. Their advance wasn't swift, but it tied up numerous German forces. The deteriorating situation on both fronts forced Hitler to eventually abandon Operation Citadel. It would be his last offensive campaign in the east.

The Red Army was no longer a soft touch, as Colonel General Hermann Hoth remarked wryly in the aftermath of Kursk: “The Russians have learnt a lot since 1941. They are no longer peasants with simple minds. They have learnt the art of war from us.”

*The Soviets were ready for the German attack at Kursk, thanks to a spy's report.*



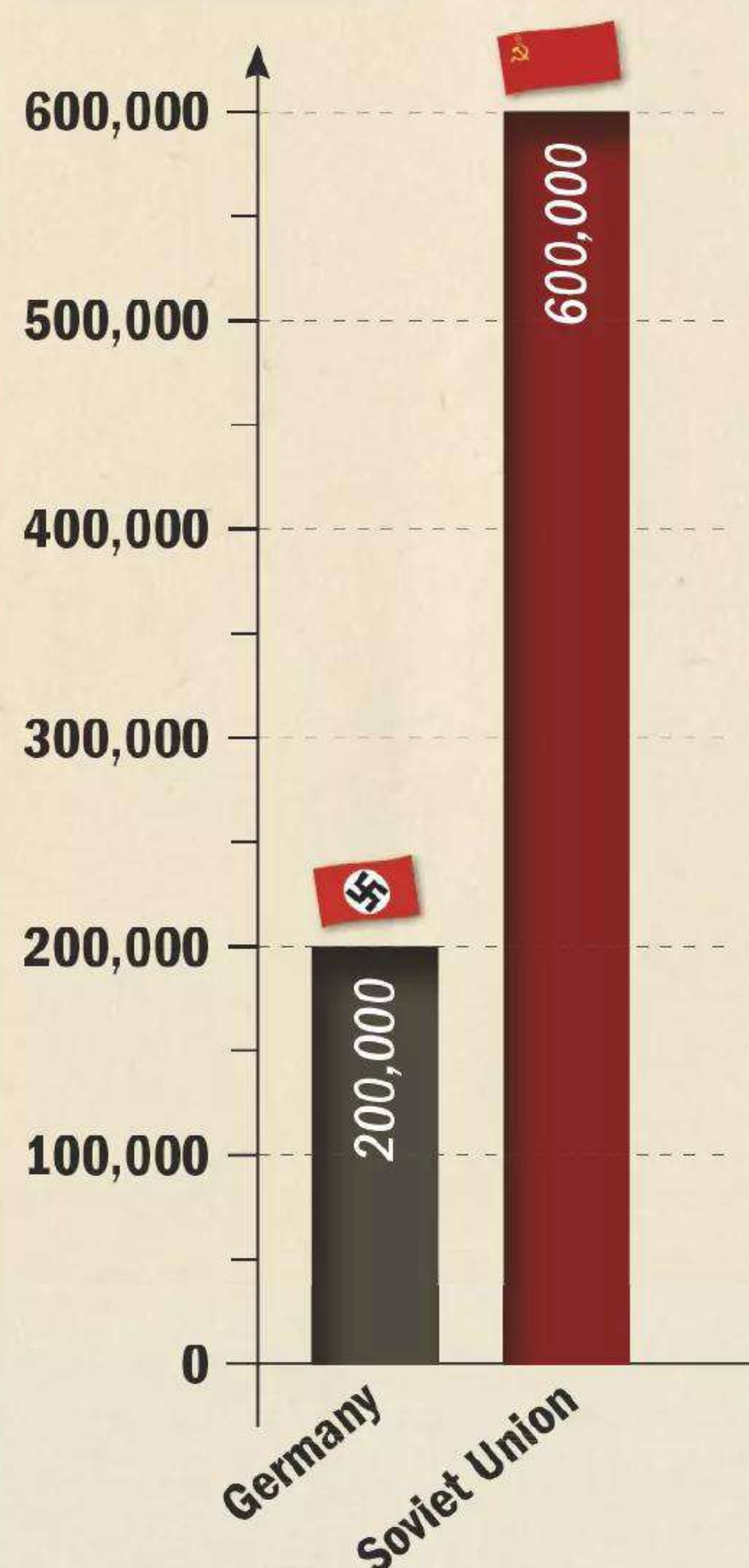


# Germans never recovered

Soviet casualties during the battle were monstrous and far surpassed the Germans, but while the Red Army had inexhaustible reserves of both soldiers and equipment, German resources were limited, and the Wehrmacht never recovered from the offensive at Kursk.

Stalin's losses were far greater than Hitler's

## Soldiers



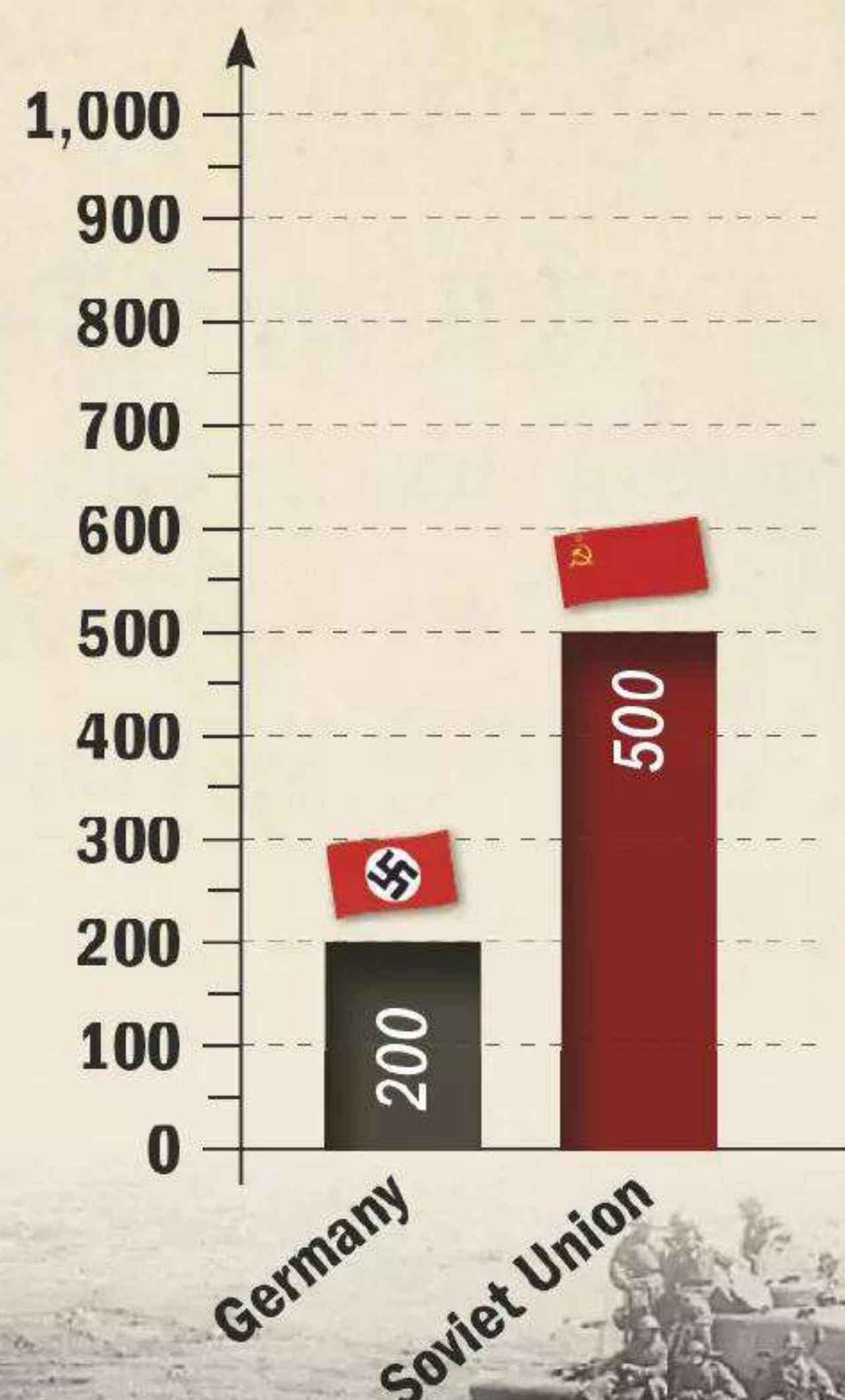
### Soviets bled

The Red Army lost half of its troops at the Battle of Kursk. They were either killed, wounded or captured.

## Tanks

### Red Army sacrificed armour

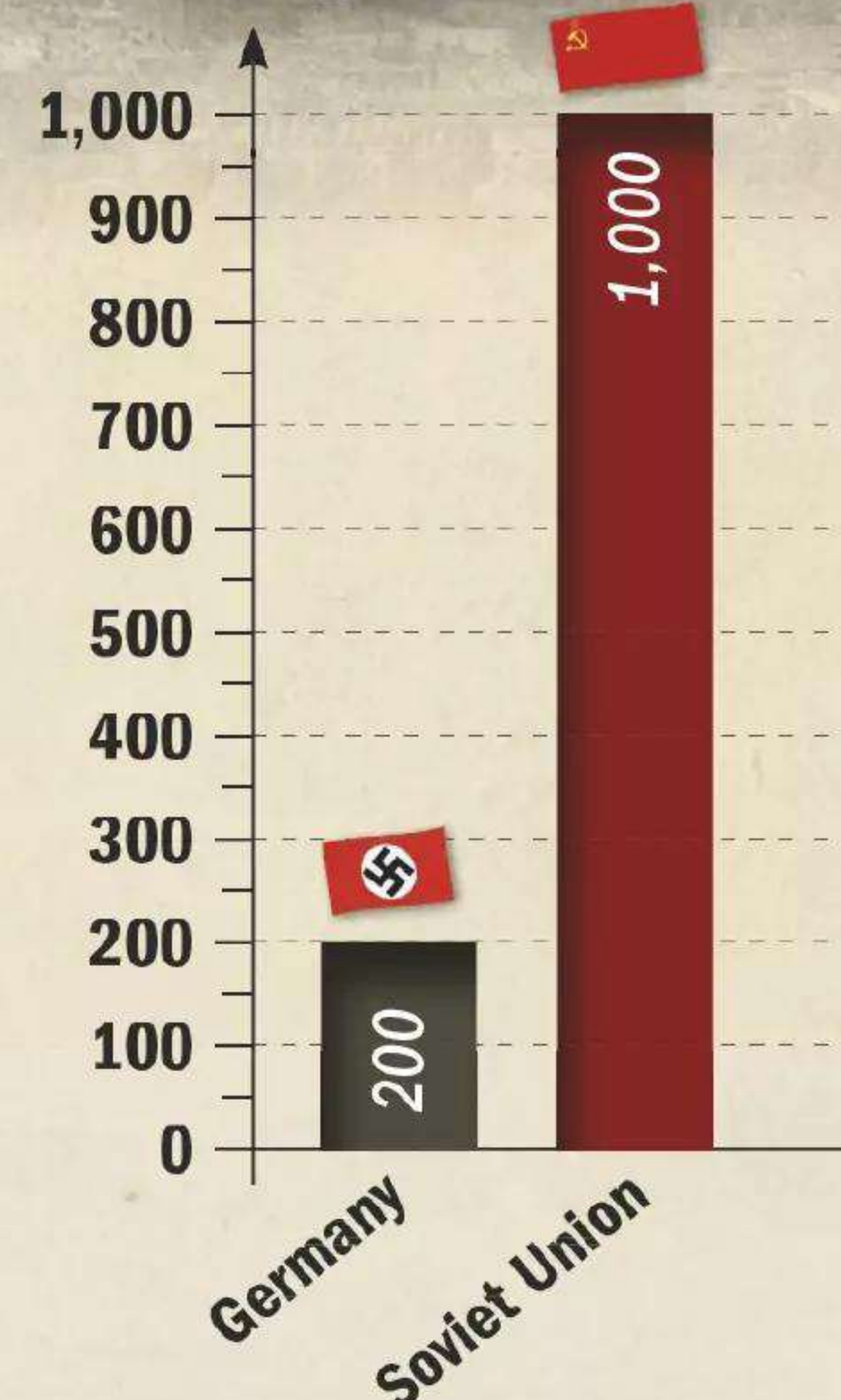
The Soviets lost far more tanks than their opponent, but they managed to maintain tank production in contrast to the Germans, who were unable to keep up with their losses.



Mass production of T-34s helped the Soviets greatly at Kursk.

## Planes

Soviet planes swarmed over the battlefields of Kursk in 1943.

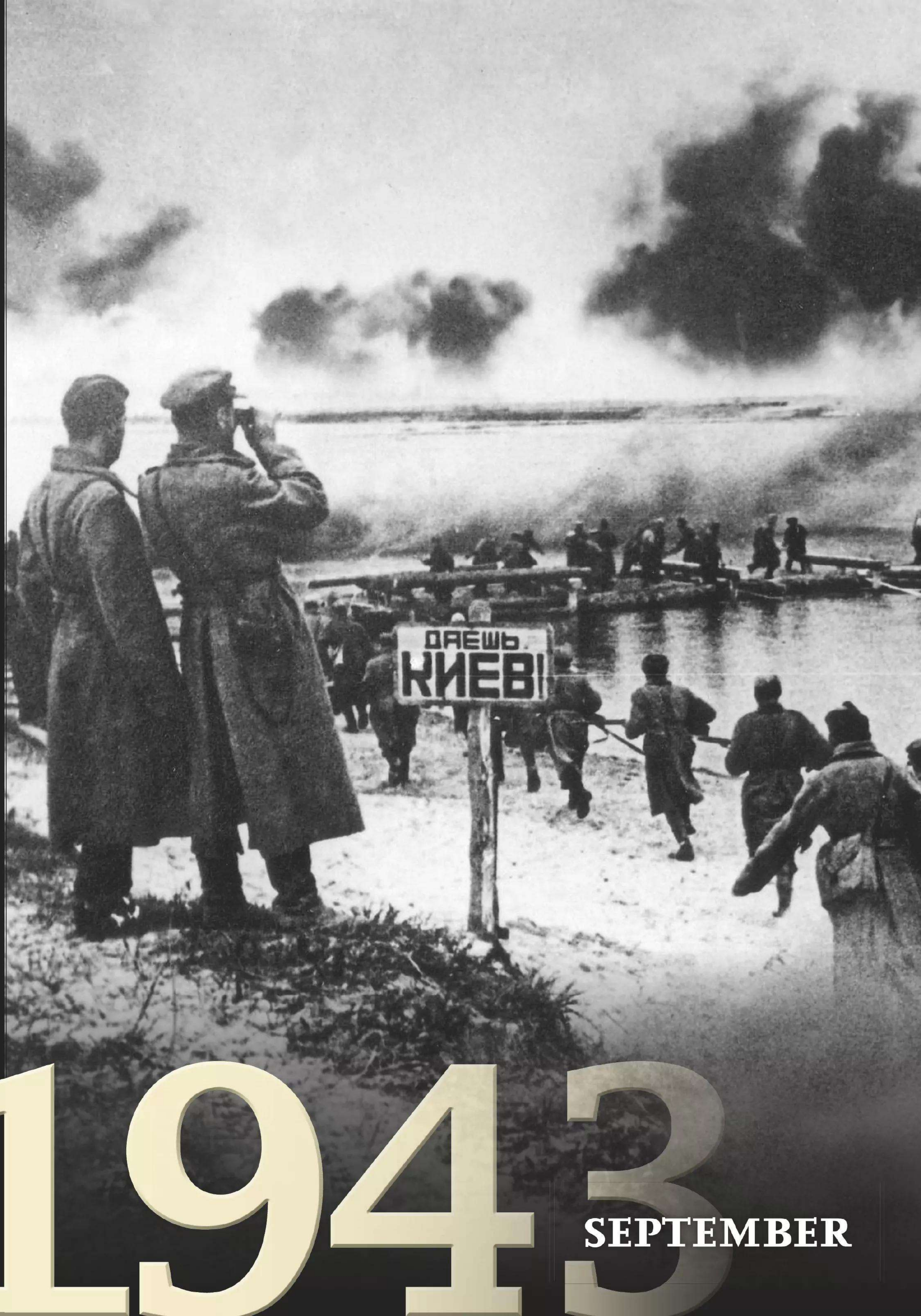


### Germans lost a quarter

Soviet wrecking tactics extended to the air battles. The 200 German aircraft that were lost cost the hard-pressed Luftwaffe dearly.

Two Soviets wait for the enemy's attack. A dead German soldier lies off to one side.

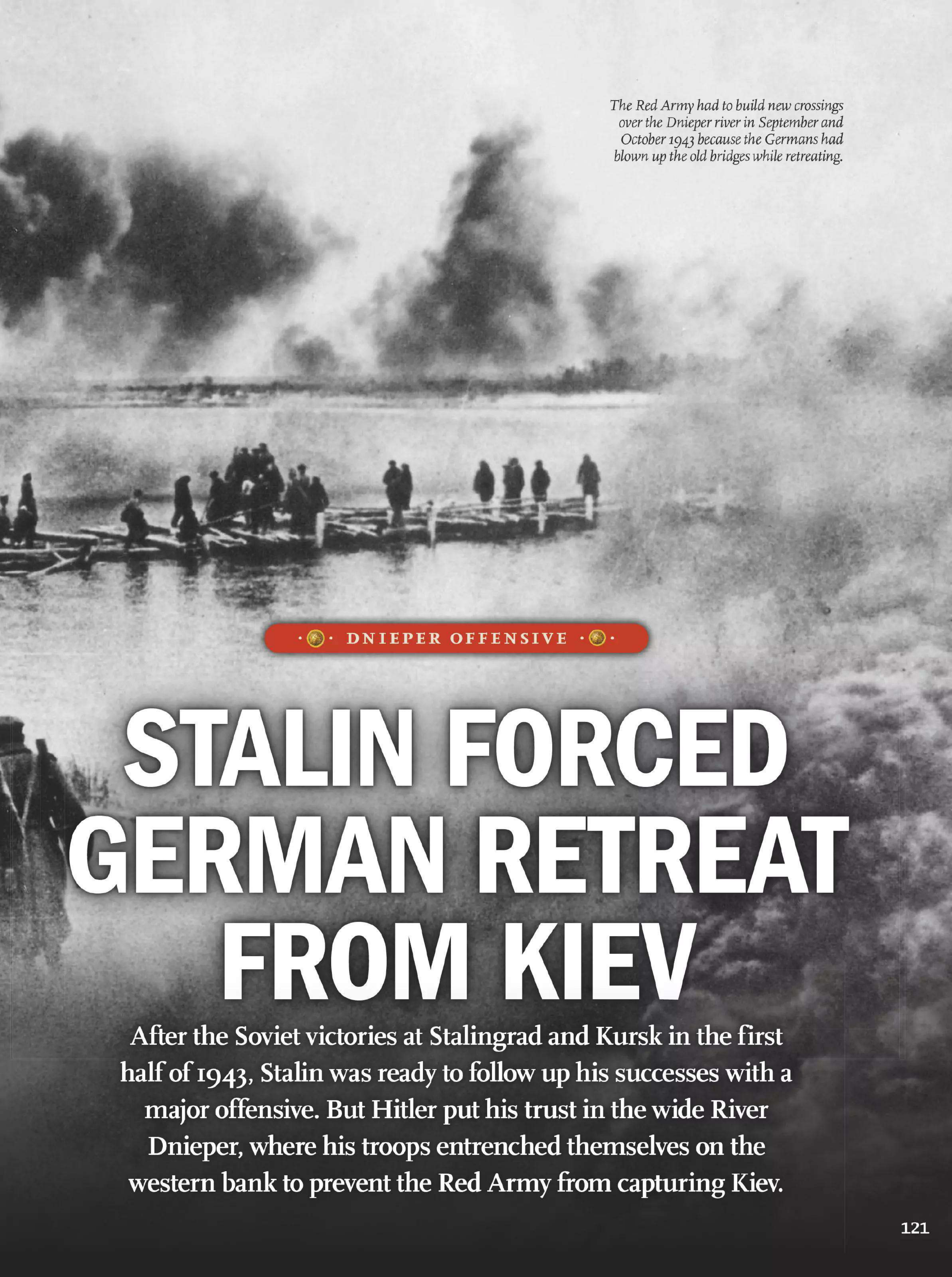




1943

SEPTEMBER





*The Red Army had to build new crossings over the Dnieper river in September and October 1943 because the Germans had blown up the old bridges while retreating.*

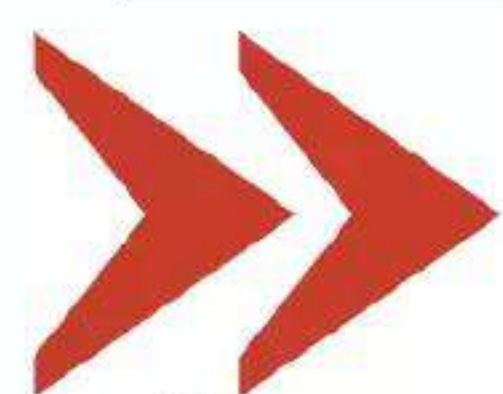
•  • DNIEPER OFFENSIVE •  •

# STALIN FORCED GERMAN RETREAT FROM KIEV

After the Soviet victories at Stalingrad and Kursk in the first half of 1943, Stalin was ready to follow up his successes with a major offensive. But Hitler put his trust in the wide River Dnieper, where his troops entrenched themselves on the western bank to prevent the Red Army from capturing Kiev.



## THE STAGE IS SET



In September 1943, Hitler withdraws his beleaguered forces on the Eastern Front, and they entrench themselves on the River Dnieper's western bank. But when Stalin orders the Red Army to capture Kiev before the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution on 7th November, the German troops face a furious Soviet onslaught.



**T**HE NOISE IN KIEV WAS DEAFENING in mid-September 1943. Two years of Nazi occupation had drained the Soviet Union's third largest city and reduced its population by 700,000, but now the Ukrainian capital was filling up by the hour with German troops from the Eastern Front. Heavy vehicles blocked the streets, and on the city's access roads, military engineers were erecting concrete blocks to halt the enemy's tanks. The Germans moved guns into place behind the defences and piled up tonnes of sandbags to protect the powerful machine guns that were to stop the Red Army.

In Kiev's eastern district, where the deep River Dnieper flowed, heavy tanks clattered over the bridges. The metal meeting asphalt produced a crushing sound that grated in the ears of the troops who were also crossing the river. As the last soldiers from the battlefields arrived in Kiev, gigantic bangs could be heard, and the bridges plunged into the water, destroyed by the Germans' explosives.

North and south of the Ukrainian capital, the same scene could be witnessed – German tanks and trucks full of troops crossed the Dnieper to establish positions on the west bank to form a defensive wall in Ukraine. Although the line was over 1,000 kilometres long, the Nazis felt well equipped to withstand the Soviet war machine, which would soon be standing on the Dnieper's eastern side. All the same, to avoid heavy fighting, German planes flew over the advancing enemy and dropped thousands of leaflets in an attempt to

deter the Red Army: "Germany has clad the west bank of the Dnieper in concrete and shod it with iron....Death awaits you on the Dnieper. Stop before it is too late," they warned.

Soviet general Nikolai Vatutin didn't think much of the Germans' intimidation campaign, however, as he read the flyer several kilometres outside Kiev. The stout Russian, commander of the 1st Ukrainian Front, screwed up the piece of paper and continued towards the Dnieper. The general had a deadline. Stalin had proclaimed that Kiev must be captured by 7th November. And Vatutin had no intention of disappointing his leader.

#### HITLER RELUCTANTLY ACCEPTED RETREAT

In the months leading up to the German entrenchment along the Dnieper, the Red Army had first defeated the Germans at Kursk and then at Kharkov on 24th August 1943. The day after, Stalin's general staff convened and planned a major offensive against the weakened Germans. The Red Army was sure that the enemy would try to build defensive positions along the Dnieper, so it would have to advance rapidly to make sure that the Germans wouldn't have time to establish an effective line of defence. Upon arrival at the river, the Soviets would attack along a wide front, so they could cross the Dnieper at many points at once, keeping the enemy under constant pressure.

Finally, the general staff decided that once the Dnieper's west bank was under Red Army control, central railway lines



*Red Army soldiers floated weapons and other equipment across the river on precarious rafts.*



and important towns would be attacked – primarily Kiev, which Stalin insisted be liberated before 7th November 1943, to mark the 26th anniversary of 1917's October Revolution.

Like the Soviet officers, German Field Marshal Erich von Manstein had no doubt that the only sensible move after the German setbacks would be to retreat to the Dnieper. Unfortunately for the head of Army Group South, Hitler refused to budge when the two met in central Ukraine in late August. He insisted that the troops had to hold their position, imagining, as was his wont, that the Soviets would have to give up soon.

A few weeks later, when the German situation on the Eastern Front hadn't improved, von Manstein succeeded in convincing the stubborn Führer that the natural line of defence along the River Dnieper would block a Soviet attack. As the Dnieper was over 300 metres wide – even up to 700 metres in some places – it was eminently suitable as a line of defence. The enemy would find it difficult to transport equipment to the opposite bank, and if a truck or tank ended up in the water, the depth of the river ensured that the vehicle would never resurface. In most places, the western bank was also very high, so if the Soviets did manage to cross the Dnieper, they'd have to fight their way up the steep slopes.

Hitler reluctantly accepted von Manstein's argument – the most important thing for Germany, after all, was that the enemy didn't capture the whole of Ukraine. The southern part of the Soviet Union was vital to the Germans, because the area's fields were rich in grain, and the subsoil contained large deposits of iron ore and coal – essential resources if the huge German war machine was to keep running.

### GERMANS PLUNDERED AS THEY RETREATED

On 14th September, von Manstein ordered his troops on the southern portion of the Eastern Front to retreat to the Dnieper. The soldiers, exhausted after heavy fighting, breathed a sigh of relief. The troops sensed that the enemy had both more men and more artillery, while the Germans at the front were only being replaced gradually.

A total of 1.2 million Germans began the retreat. The lucky ones got a seat in trucks or trains, while others dragged themselves along the gravel Ukrainian roads. All, however, had to make regular stops, because von Manstein had ordered that any agricultural areas should be plundered.

"The food situation at home makes it essential that the troops should as far as possible be fed off the land and that the largest possible stock should be placed at the disposal of the homeland," was von Manstein's message.

Two hundred thousand cattle, 270,000 sheep, 153,000 horses and 40,000 wagonloads of food were stolen from the starving farmers of the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine. The Germans loaded it all on long freight trains at the nearest railway stations – 2,942 trains transported supplies, along with wounded and evacuated soldiers, to the western side of the Dnieper in September.

But the German troops weren't just to loot – they were also ordered to follow a scorched earth policy. Anything the enemy could use had to be destroyed. The result was clear to the Red Army soldiers pursuing the Germans: "Kilometre after



Brass buttons adorned the Soviet officers' uniforms.

1887-1973
1901-1944



NAME	<b>ERICH VON MANSTEIN</b>
TITLE	FIELD MARSHAL

○○○

### Tactical genius clashed with Hitler

Von Manstein was one of the few German officers who, on several occasions, expressed his disagreement with Hitler when the two met. That kind of rebellion usually led to dismissal, but the Führer had such respect for von Manstein's achievements and tactical ability that the field marshal was allowed to remain in his post for most of the war. In 1944, however, he was dismissed because he'd advocated a quick retreat on the Eastern Front.

- Fought on the Western Front in WWI.
- Sentenced to 18 years in prison in 1949.





NAME	<b>NIKOLAI VATUTIN</b>
TITLE	GENERAL

○○○

### Poor peasant was feared commander

Nikolai Vatutin was born into an impoverished peasant family and joined the Communist Party in 1920. As a general, he played a major role in the Battle of Kursk with his extreme tactics. These strategies cost many of his soldiers their lives because they had to advance at such a furious pace. However, his achievements spoke for themselves, and while Stalin admired Vatutin, the general became one of the Germans' most feared opponents.

- Received the highest Soviet order.
- Was assassinated in 1944.



kilometre of destruction and misery. The Germans were certainly very good at this job. In numerous villages, the barns and storage facilities were burnt down, the grain silos blown up and farmers left without grain to tide them over to the next harvest. The Germans set fire to houses and shot any inhabitants who resisted," wrote the Soviet private Gabriel Temkin in his diary.

The Soviet soldiers were greeted by Ukrainians who, after the long occupation, threw their arms around their liberators and told them about the German atrocities. Some of the Ukrainians were emaciated, having lived on grass for weeks. For the Soviet war correspondent Vasily Grossman, who was following General Vatutin's troops, it was clear that the army's hatred of the enemy had flared up violently during the advance: "Every soldier, every officer and every general of the Red Army who had seen the Ukraine in blood and fire... understands to the bottom of their souls that there are two



*The Hero of the Soviet Union order was the country's highest honour – 11,635 people received it during the war.*

sacred words left to us. One of them is 'love' and the other is 'revenge'."

The Soviets rolled on relentlessly further west towards the Dnieper in pursuit of von Manstein's forces.

### DEAD ANIMALS EVERYWHERE

Stalin's commanders were eager to stick to the schedule and give the Germans as little time as possible to entrench themselves on the Dnieper's west bank. But the frantic pace came at a cost. The horses that pulled the wooden supply carts became too tired to eat and collapsed. Dead animals swarming with flies lay along the roadside as the troops bringing up the rear passed by.

The consequence was that many units lacked both food and vital equipment by the time they finally glimpsed the River Dnieper at the end of September. For the advance forces, however, assault rifles and guns were enough to attack the few unfortunate German soldiers who hadn't managed to cross to the western side of the river before the five remaining bridges had been blown up.

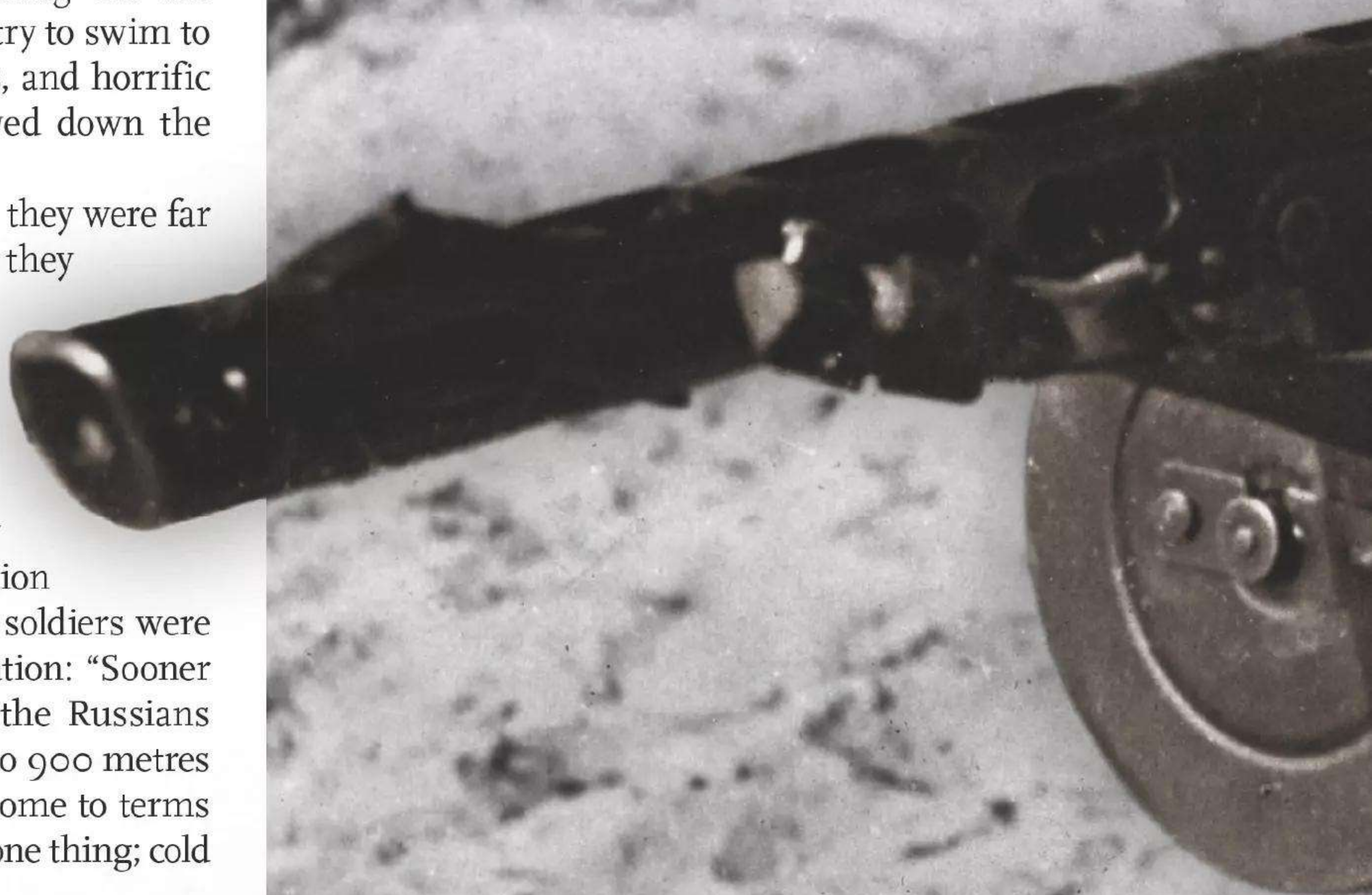
The men panicked and, leaving everything on the riverbank, threw themselves into the water to try to swim to the far side. The sound of gunfire, explosions, and horrific screams could be heard as the Soviets mowed down the Germans as they tried to reach safety.

Such incidents reminded the Germans that they were far from safe behind the defence line. Although they had established kilometres of defensive positions along the Dnieper, the river meandered over 1,000 kilometres through the Ukrainian landscape, and it was impossible to defend every single stone along the bank – not least when the Red Army advanced towards the river with over 2.6 million vengeful men. But even though the German soldiers were worried, Hitler was optimistic about the situation: "Sooner will the Dnieper flow backwards than will the Russians overcome it – that powerful water barrier 700 to 900 metres wide," proclaimed the Führer, who had now come to terms with the idea of retreat. But defiant words were one thing; cold reality was something quite different.

### SOVIETS FLOATED ON RAFTS

General Vatutin's enormous forces didn't all reach the Dnieper at the same time, but due to the pressure of Stalin's deadline, the Red Army officers didn't hesitate to send units off towards the west bank. Instead of waiting for pontoons or other regulation transport to arrive, the soldiers threw themselves into the river on rafts or tried to swim across, their heavy, wet clothing threatening to drag them underwater.

If they were lucky, local partisans ferried the soldiers across in small dinghies or fishing boats, where there







*Armed with a Shpagin PPSH-41 submachine gun, a Soviet soldier fires at the Germans during the Battle of the Dnieper.*



# Nazis had to abandon holding the 1,000-kilometre front

With almost four million soldiers along a 1,000-kilometre front, the Dnieper was one of WWII's largest theatres of war. Within four months, the Red Army had pushed the Germans back and secured a firm foothold along the river's western bank.

## 5 The Red Army crosses Kerch

**2nd November 1943:** The Soviets cross the Kerch Strait and land in Crimea. Later the same month, the Red Army attacks the German 17th Army, which had retreated to Crimea, from the peninsula's northern tip.



The Germans began to evacuate the 17th Army to Crimea on 7th September.

## 4 Operation fails

**25th October 1943:** Fifty divisions attempt to surround the Germans by establishing bridgeheads at both Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia — however, the Soviets' operation fails and the Red Army loses 15,000 men.



Tiger tanks from Germany's Panzer Corps also took part in the Dnieper Offensive.

## 6 Kiev falls

**6th November 1943:** The day before the anniversary of the 1917 Revolution, the Soviets capture Kiev, and Stalin celebrates the victory with gun salutes in Moscow. Only 200,000 of the city's 900,000 inhabitants remain after two years of German occupation. The rest have been killed or fled.

## 7 The attack continues



**10th December 1943:** The Red Army captures an important railway junction at Znamianka. Four days later, Soviet troops also capture the city of Cherkasy. The Soviets now control almost all the major towns on the western side of the Dnieper.



The news that the Red Army had crossed the Dnieper travelled around the world.



0 50 100 150 200 250 km

 Soviet forces  
 Advances



*The cap worn by Lieutenant General Hans Schmidt during the defence of the Dnieper.*

### 3 **Vatutin makes cunning move**

**10th October 1943:** The Soviets establish a large bridgehead at Lyutezh on the Dnieper's west bank. On 25th October, General Nikolai Vatutin chooses to transfer units to Lyutezh so that a major offensive against Kiev can be launched from there. The plan is to take the Germans by surprise.

### 2 **Red Army captures Bukrin**

**22nd September 1943:** The first Soviet troops reach the Dnieper south of Kiev. The following day, they capture the Germans' defensive position at Bukrin on the Dnieper's western side. Over the course of one week, the Soviets extend their bridgehead to 20 kilometres long and three kilometres wide.

### 1 **Soviets launch offensive**

**23rd August 1943:** Red Army forces capture Kharkov and continue their offensive in a westerly direction. On 14th September, Hitler accepts that his troops must retreat and establishes a 1,000-kilometre line of defence along the River Dnieper.

was also room for artillery weapons. Other men had to push the regiment's guns across on rafts, while swimming alongside. Despite a barrage of German artillery and mortar fire, the constant threat of fighter jets, and machine-gun bullets whipping across the water, several Soviet battalions managed to capture the first bridgeheads in the last week of September. The Red Army's forces were so numerous that, despite heavy losses, they were able to continue their attack on the opposite bank.

On 23rd September, units from Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front captured an important German defensive position near Bukrin, almost 100 km south of Kiev, despite being unable able to transport heavy artillery or food across to the western side of the river. However, taking the position was costly: "It was really frightening... So many people were killed. There were 280 new recruits in a neighbouring battalion. At the end of the battle, only 16 of them were left. We were crawling around on our hands and knees, sheltering from the incessant bombing and scavenging for food," recalled a nurse who'd swum across the Dnieper to take care of the many wounded.

By the end of September, the Red Army had extended the Bukrin bridgehead to 20 kilometres wide and three kilometres deep. Its success continued in mid-October, when its forces held several bridgeheads on the Dnieper's western side. Meanwhile, new pontoon bridges had made it possible for heavy Soviet artillery to cross the river.

But Vatutin was still some way from Kiev. The defences along the Dnieper were too strong, so the general hoped that the troops at Bukrin could force the enemy to retreat all the way back to the Ukrainian capital. This strategy had been anticipated by the experienced von Manstein, however, who deployed extra forces in the area. For several weeks, the Red Army at Bukrin was unable to advance, and the pressure on Vatutin grew as 7th November approached. But the Russian hadn't given up. He had a trump card up his sleeve.

#### **VATUTIN TRICKED THE ENEMY**

Rain poured down at 22:00 on 25th October, when Soviet tanks at Bukrin started their engines. Headlights shielded, the machines set off through the gloom towards the pontoon bridge that led >>

*Soviet troops clung tightly to the bridgeheads they established on the Dnieper's west bank.*



back to Dnieper's eastern shore. Fortunately, clouds meant that aircraft were unable to spot the tanks moving slowly away from the Bukrin front.

A few days previously, the commander at Bukrin had received a message from Vatutin, ordering the transfer of troops from Bukrin to Lyutech, 25 kilometres north of Kiev, where the Red Army had established a bridgehead earlier that month: "Make the march in absolute secrecy, move only at night.... Categorically prohibit radio transmission. Conduct no telephone conversations concerning the move," stated the order.

Vatutin's daring plan was to surprise von Manstein by assembling a powerful army at Lyutech, where the Germans weren't expecting an attack. To fool the enemy, the troops at Bukrin had worked hard to produce fake tanks in the days leading up to 25th October. Wooden frames had been knocked up and covered with soil to resemble tanks from the air. Normal radio communication was to continue in Bukrin as the forces moved away, so the Germans wouldn't discover



*Medals were given to soldiers who'd taken part in the capture of the bridgehead at Bukrin.*

that something was going on. Every night during the redeployment, the remaining soldiers at Bukrin went around lighting bonfires, making it look as though the Soviet camp was still full of troops.

Night after night in late October, tanks and trucks of soldiers rolled through the vast forest to Lyutezh. As well as the constant cloud cover and heavy rain, the trees also helped to hide the heavy vehicles, which couldn't cover the 200 kilometres in just one night. They hid in the depths of the forest during daylight, when the German reconnaissance planes had a better view. By 28th October, 200 tanks, 150 self-

propelled guns, 500 tractors and 3,500 other vehicles had been moved to points east of the Dnieper, and for the next three nights, they rolled along the last dangerous stretch of road over two pontoon bridges to the bridgehead at Lyutezh. To prevent enemy aircraft bombing the crossings, they were shrouded in dense smoke, released from Soviet cannons.

On 2nd November, the subterfuge was complete. A huge army stood ready on the western side of the Dnieper, north of Kiev, and the Germans didn't feel threatened at all. Soviet tanks and guns were no more than 10 kilometres from Kiev.

## Partisans paved the way for the Red Army

Soviet partisans harassed the German army behind the front line by sabotaging vital supply lines and means of transportation.

In 1943, the Soviet partisan movement played a significant role in the Red Army's struggle against the German army. One of their tasks was to carry out acts of sabotage to ensure that supplies struggled to get through. In June 1943 alone, the German Army Group Central registered 1,092 attacks, including 298 damaged locomotives and 44 destroyed bridges. To thwart such attacks, the Germans started felling trees for up to 200 metres on either side of the railway tracks, yet the underground movement still managed to lay mines at night and continue their sabotage at great inconvenience to the Nazis.

## SOVIET TROOPS CAPTURED A BROKEN KIEV

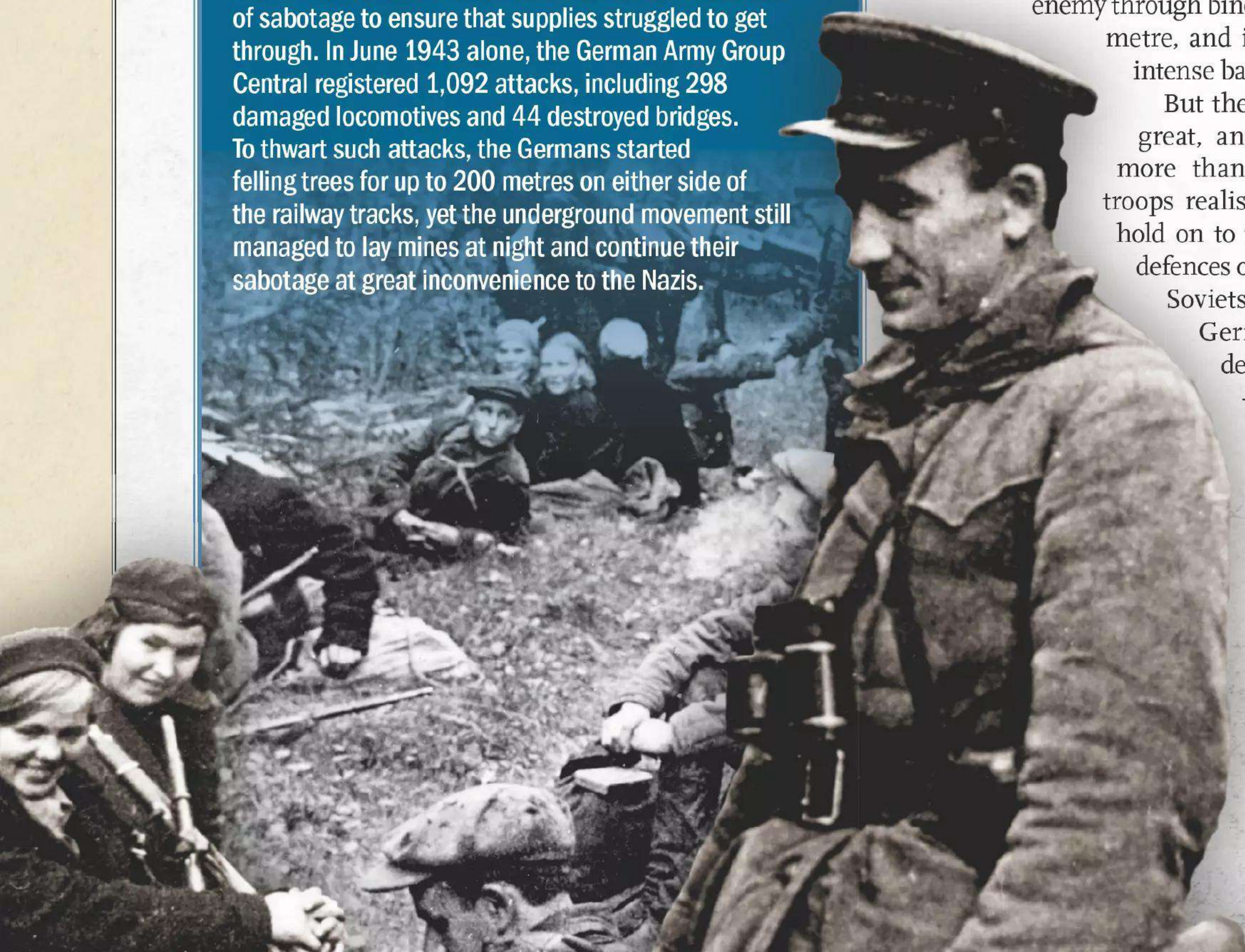
While Vatutin's tanks had moved quietly through darkness during the redeployment, the situation was reversed on the morning of 3rd November, when the Red Army attacked Kiev from Lyutezh. The vehicles' headlights were set to maximum power, and the Soviets mounted audio amplifiers on the tanks to scare the enemy as much as possible. Outside the city, the Red Army had lined up several rows of guns, which fired shells at the German soldiers' defences.

Behind the barricades in Kiev, the Germans watched the enemy through binoculars, approaching metre by metre, and in the days that followed, an intense battle for supremacy raged.

But the Soviets' superiority was too great, and after fighting fiercely for more than two days, von Manstein's troops realised that it was impossible to hold on to the Ukrainian capital. While defences on the city's north side held the

Soviets at bay a little longer, the Germans began systematically destroying the remains of Kiev – 940 government buildings, 800 factories and 140 schools were set alight on 5th November. The water system was put out of action, and when the last German forces withdrew from the city on the night of 6th November, Kiev's old

*Partisans helped the Red Army with both sabotage and direct attacks on the Germans.*





churches lay in ruins, and the city's conservatoire, university and power plant had all been burned to the ground.

At 04.00, the first Red Army tanks rumbled over the rubble in northern Kiev, and the city was soon teeming with Soviet soldiers. The surviving inhabitants gradually crept out of their hiding places and viewed their surroundings with mixed feelings. For the first time in two years, Kiev was free – in return, the town was ruined beyond recognition.

### STALIN GAINED CONTROL OF THE DNEIPER

For Vatutin, the conquest of Kiev was a great victory, regardless of the city's state. The Germans had been forced out of the largest occupied city in the Soviet Union, and it had been done in time for the anniversary of the Revolution. The victory was celebrated with cannon salutes in Moscow, where Stalin seized the opportunity to commemorate fallen comrades and

send a message to the enemy: "Eternal glory to the heroes who fell in the struggle for the freedom and independence of our Motherland! Death to the German invaders!"

By early December, the Red Army had gained a foothold on the Dnieper's western bank. Important bridgeheads at Cherkasy and Dnepropetrovsk were also established, and in the far south the Soviets stormed the Crimean Peninsula. But the rapid advance had cost dearly: the Soviets had lost an average of 3,500 men a day during the Dnieper Offensive.

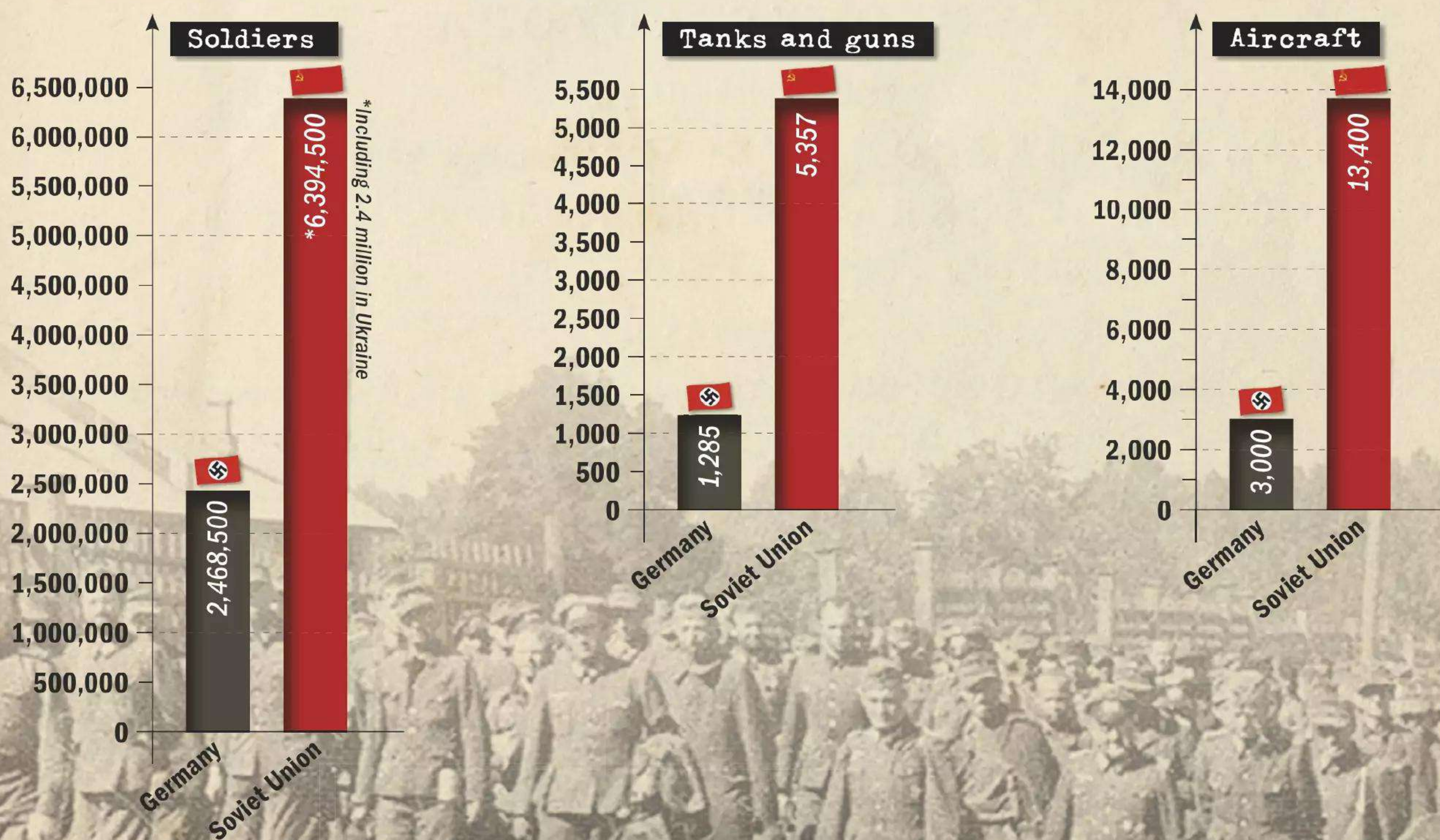
In four months, the Soviets had pushed the Germans back more than 250 km along a 1,000-km front, and the Red Army had recaptured an area the size of Britain. As 1943 drew to a close, Stalin could look back on a year in which his troops had inflicted irreparable damage on the German invaders, while he himself became more and more convinced that victory was approaching.

## PERSPECTIVE

# Stalin strengthened by the Dnieper's capture

Although Soviet losses during the Dnieper Offensive were far greater than those of the Germans, Stalin's forces remained the stronger at the campaign's conclusion in December 1943. The huge losses were manageable because the Red Army had massive reserves of soldiers, equipment and weapons.

### The balance of power after the Dnieper Offensive



*The number of German prisoners of war increased with Stalin's victories in the east.*



•  SOVIET WINTER OFFENSIVE  •

# STALIN LIBERATED LENINGRAD

For almost two and a half years, the Germans held Leningrad in an iron ring to starve the city into surrender. But in January 1944, the Red Army planned an attack that would finally break the German siege. Following the most powerful bombardment of World War II, the Soviet forces stormed forward.

1944 27<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY

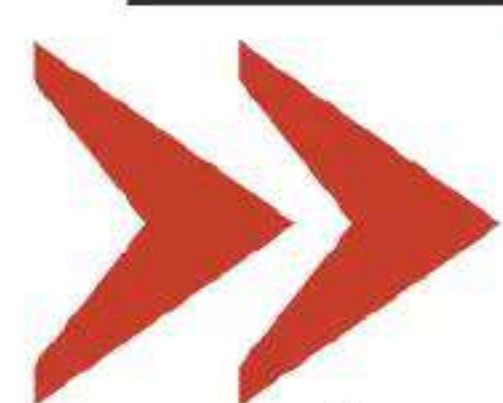


*Soviet troops leap from  
their vehicles in an attack  
on the town of Krasnoye  
Selo during the offensive  
to liberate Leningrad.*





## THE STAGE IS SET



Just outside Leningrad, in January 1944, the Red Army gathers the largest strike force ever seen during the war. The Soviets are about to throw an enormous arsenal of guns, troops, planes, and tanks into an offensive that will liberate Leningrad and its inhabitants from the Germans' stranglehold on the city once and for all.



**A**T ALMOST 09.30 ON 15TH JANUARY 1944, an ominous rumble warned Leningrad's residents that something was afoot. From the distance came the thunder of guns, rattling their windows. Plaster fell from the ceilings and walls of the citizens' homes, and items were shaken off shelves. Terrified, people stopped what they were doing and crowded into the streets and squares, staring up into the sky in confusion. The blasts were ear-splitting, but they couldn't see any missiles.

After a few moments of bewilderment, it dawned on the crowd what was about to happen. "Those are our guns," shouted someone. "It's begun! It's begun!"

The excitement was understandable. The shelling, which was unleashed by Soviet guns deployed in the Pulkovo Heights, just south of Leningrad, was not only the largest artillery attack in history,

but the noise, which drove the citizens out of their houses and into the streets, also marked the end of the German besiegement, which had held Leningrad in an iron ring for almost 900 days.

The Germans' prolonged siege had decimated the city's inhabitants, hundreds of thousands of whom had perished as a result of bombing, starvation or disease.

### SOVIETS OPENED A CORRIDOR TO THE CITY

The German army had begun the siege of Leningrad on 8th September 1941, but Hitler had forbidden the occupation of the city. The Führer didn't want to have to feed the 2.5 million inhabitants and insisted that his generals must not accept their surrender.

Instead, Army Group North had to create a ring around the city, preventing Leningrad's citizens from receiving food or other supplies. By starving the population, Hitler would be able to fulfil two of his goals: he could purge the city of Soviets, whom he considered to be subhuman, and take over



NAME

**LEONID GOVOROV**

TITLE

GENERAL

## General was Leningrad's hero

Leonid Govorov was one of the first officers to graduate from the Red Army's General Staff Academy. He rose steadily in rank and in 1944 was promoted to the country's highest military position: Marshal of the Soviet Union. Three years earlier, Govorov had served as artillery commander in the Fifth Army against German troops at the Battle of Moscow, and the following year he was appointed commander of the besieged city of Leningrad. Govorov excelled in the defence of the city, not least in connection with Operation Iskra in January 1943 and the final liberation of the city a year later. Before the offensives, the commander had studied the German besiegers, and knew the exact number and location of German troops, tanks and artillery positions before making his assault. His efforts in Leningrad in 1945 earned him the country's highest honour: Hero of the Soviet Union.

- > Fought during the Russian Civil War in 1918-20.
- > In 1952, he became Deputy Minister of Defence.





*Soviet tanks stuck near the town of Pavlovsk, south of Leningrad. The operation was timed to take advantage of the hard-frozen terrain that could be expected in January, which would normally ease the movement of armoured vehicles.*

Leningrad's arms industry. The cruel plan came close to succeeding. After a few weeks, the food started to run out. Leningrad's residents survived on potatoes and vegetables found in the surrounding fields. Over time, people began to make soup from shoes and leather belts to sate their hunger, while extreme starvation forced some to eat human remains.

However, hunger was not the only torment. The winter of 1941-1942 was unusually harsh, with temperatures down to minus 40 degrees. The fuel ran out and people froze to death both in their homes and on the streets. Throughout the siege, bombs and shells from German positions rained down on the residents. Historians estimate that between 1.1 and 1.3 million people died during the siege.

The fortunes of the German forces, however, began to turn. In particular, the defeat at Stalingrad in 1942 weakened Hitler's troops. The Red Army wasn't slow to take advantage of the situation. In January 1943, the Soviet forces launched a large-scale military operation called Operation Iskra. During the operation, which lasted from 12th to 30th January 1943, the Red Army managed to create an eight-to-ten-kilometre-wide corridor into the besieged city. At the same time, the railway line between Leningrad and Moscow reopened. Together with the road across the frozen Lake Ladoga, which the Red Army had used to get in and out of Leningrad for the past three

winters, the railway provided an opportunity to transport much-needed supplies to the city's beleaguered population and evacuate some of the inhabitants.

But Operation Iskra didn't liberate the Soviet city from the Nazi stranglehold. Hitler's forces still surrounded the city, threatening its inhabitants.

### **RED ARMY WAS SUPERIOR IN NUMBER**

Immediately after Operation Iskra, the Red Army tried to lift the siege, but without success. In the autumn of 1943, however, the Soviets plans for liberating the city improved. General Leonid Govorov, who had played an important role in Operation Iskra, came up with the idea for a new offensive.

The three-pronged attack was to originate from the Soviet Oranienbaum Bridgehead, a 65-kilometre-long and 25-km-wide area that stretched from the Pulkovo Heights south of Leningrad to the west, along the south coast of the Gulf of Finland. The bridgehead had been isolated from Leningrad during the German siege, but the area included both a strong Soviet garrison and parts of Stalin's fleet. And with the weakening of the German forces on the Eastern Front, the time had come to use the bridgehead as a starting point for the Red Army's final liberation of the city. The offensive itself was not to start until winter, when the

# **“We’re living through hell”**

German officer describes the Soviets' attack on Leningrad in a letter to his wife on 14th January 1944.



# “Many people...would prefer to be clubbed to death”

German intelligence report on residents' reluctance to be evacuated from the west of Leningrad.

## Rocket travelled nine kilometres

Katyusha missiles were fired from rails mounted on trucks, trailers or sledges, and were able to reach the enemy at a distance of 8.7 kilometres.

A Katyusha battery typically consisted of four vehicles. A full salvo fired from a battery could carpet-bomb an area the size of 40 football pitches in just under ten seconds. The Katyusha was a simple, flexible and mobile weapon that could mass-bomb the enemy and be quickly moved to new launch sites.

**The ramp** consisted of parallel rails from which the rockets were fired. Depending on the number of ramps, between six and 48 rockets could be mounted.

**Protective panels** could cover the windows of the cab.

**Katyusha**

**Lifting frame** that could raise the launch pad itself.

**The vehicle** was often a ZIS truck.

**The M-13 rocket** was 180 centimetres long, its diameter measured 13.2 cm, and it weighed 42 kilograms. It could travel almost nine kilometres.

WEAPON



*The rockets were so large and unwieldy that it took two men to load the launch pad.*

### STALIN'S ORGAN

FACT

■ The Germans gave the Katyusha battery the nickname Stalin's organ, partly because the rockets resembled the pipes of a church organ, and partly because their engines made a loud howling sound when they flew through the air.



frost set in and made it easier for men and heavy vehicles to traverse the the frozen terrain.

The operation required the Soviets to move thousands of guns, tanks, troops, aircraft, shells and other ammunition to Oranienbaum. Ships provided one means of transportation. They travelled along the Neva River, which runs from Lake Ladoga through Leningrad and out into the Gulf of Finland.

When the water froze during the winter, the Red Army transported another 22,000 soldiers, 140 tanks and 380 mounted guns across the ice to other isolated forces. By early January 1944, the Soviets had assembled five rifle divisions, 13 artillery regiments, and three tank units at the Oranienbaum Bridgehead, and the Red Army had a total of 21,600 mounted guns, 600 anti-aircraft guns, 1,500 Katyusha rocket launchers, 1,475 tanks and 1,500 aircraft.

More than 1,000 Soviet goods vehicles arrived at the front, loaded with ammunition. On shells made in Leningrad factories, the workers had written: "For the blood of our workers," "For our children's anguish" or "For our murdered friends." Historians believe that the Red Army mustered the largest concentrated strike force ever gathered during the war. There were 400 heavy guns and rocket launchers on every kilometre of the front.

Things were very different for the German forces. Due to the Nazis' weakened position on the Eastern Front, the Wehrmacht had taken soldiers and equipment from around Leningrad to other parts of the front. The German front line was thinly drawn, and the commander of Army Group North, Field Marshal Georg von Küchler, was significantly less well equipped than his opponent, Govorov, with only 385 tanks, 370 aircraft and 10,070 guns.

But Küchler knew something was amiss in Leningrad and tried to take precautions early on.

### GERMANS FORCIBLY RELOCATED CIVILIANS

Georg von Küchler had prepared well in advance to withdraw his troops to a line of defence called the Panther Line, located just over 240 kilometres west of Leningrad. To facilitate the retreat, he'd ordered the evacuation of the local population between the German positions at Leningrad and the Panther Line in September 1943.

The thought of a forced march through the Soviet winter filled the civilians with horror. "Many people are saying that they would prefer to be clubbed to death on the spot rather than take part in this evacuation," wrote one intelligence officer in a report to Küchler's headquarters. "Considering the state of people's clothing, the lack of food or proper transport and the expected weather, the participants – particularly women and children – will soon be in an indescribable state," the report continued.

However, Küchler didn't allow himself to be swayed. "The population of the occupied Russian zone east of the Panther Line must be evacuated as speedily as possible," he ordered on 30th November 1943. After that, all they could do was wait for the attack.

The Soviets had planned to begin the offensive on 14th January 1944, and in order to be there for the start, General Govorov flew to Oranienbaum the night before. Later that night, Soviet planes bombed German railway >>

## LENINGRAD LIBERATED

# THE CITY WAS UNDER SIEGE FOR TWO AND A HALF YEARS

## 1941

### 8TH SEPTEMBER

The siege of Leningrad starts as German forces form an iron ring around the city. Supplies can no longer reach the city, and the ammunition it produces can't be sent out.

## 1943

### 12TH JANUARY

During Operation Iskra, Soviet forces open a corridor into Leningrad. The corridor makes it possible to get supplies to the inhabitants and at the same time transport ammunition from the city's factories to the Soviet forces.

### 19TH JANUARY

The Red Army captures Shlisselburg. Located 35 kilometres east of Leningrad, it is an important point on the road to the besieged city.

### AUTUMN

Soviet partisans carry out a series of sabotage operations targeting the German forces.

### AUTUMN AND WINTER

The Soviets transfer large quantities of troops, vehicles and ammunition to the Oranienbaum Bridgehead.

### WINTER

The Soviet population between Leningrad and the German Panther Line is evacuated. In the main, they have to make the journey on foot in the cold winter.



German badge given to soldiers fighting partisans.

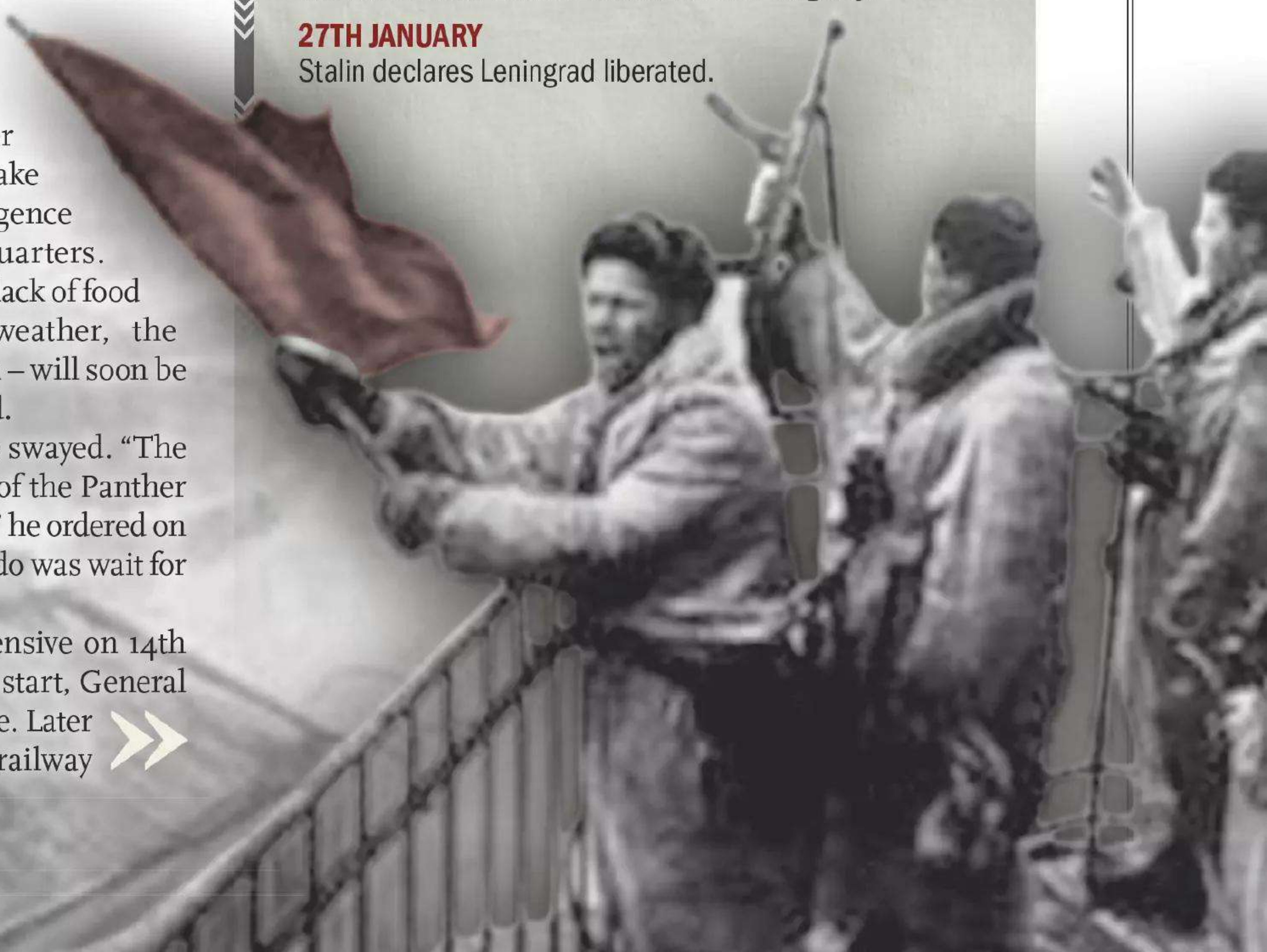
## 1944

### 14TH JANUARY

The Red Army launches its offensive from Oranienbaum. The attack from Pulkovo comes the following day.

### 27TH JANUARY

Stalin declares Leningrad liberated.







*Messages on walls had warned Leningrad residents about which side of the street was most exposed to German bombing. After the liberation of the city, the writing was removed.*



*On 27th January 1944, rockets of all colours exploded in the sky as the Red Army celebrated its victory at Leningrad.*

lines and command posts to prepare the ground for the operation. Meanwhile, heavy artillery shelled the concrete bunkers that formed the core of the German siege ring. In some

cases, the defences had three floors below ground. When the offensive itself was due to begin, however, a dense fog had settled over the front. Govorov was unable to fly back to Leningrad, but worse still was the fact that most of the bombers, which were ready on the runways, couldn't take off.

#### **THICK FOG BENEFITTED THE OFFENSIVE**

Despite the fog, the Red Army began its thundering gunfire early in the morning of 14th January. During the bombardment, which lasted over an hour, the guns at the

Oranienbaum Bridgehead fired no fewer than 104,000 shells. At the same time, rockets from the mobile Katyusha launchers howled over the German lines, while guns from both the Baltic Fleet and the fortresses of Kronstadt, Seraya Loshad and Krasnaya Gorka joined in.

"The shells were throwing up a whole wall of earth, smoke and dust with flashes of fire inside it," reported a Soviet mortarman.

The fog was so thick that the officers at the command post at the Pulkovo Heights, from where guns were attacking the south-western flank of the city, couldn't see the front at all. The sappers, however, were happy, because the fog enabled them to clear a path for mines all the way from the Soviet-controlled area to Leningrad, unseen by the Germans.

The vanguard of Soviet infantry and tank troops advanced just over three kilometres along an approximately 11-kilometre front. From the start of the offensive, the Germans were under pressure. "We can forget about my leave. Here a battle is boiling which outdoes everything we've seen up to now. The Russians are advancing on three sides. We're living through

# "A task of great historical importance"

*General Govorov on the liberation of Leningrad.*



hell. I can't describe it," a German officer wrote in a hasty letter to his wife. "If I survive, I'll tell you about it when we see each other. At the moment all I can say is one thing – wish me luck." It was the end of the first day of the offensive.

General Govorov, who collaborated with Soviet partisans behind enemy lines for the first time, anticipated a rapid German defeat. In particular, he expected the attack from the Pulkovo Heights on the second day of the offensive to force the German troops to withdraw completely. And the Soviet soldiers were ready to advance as soon as their guns had destroyed the Nazi positions and weakened the Germans.

On the morning of 15th January, Soviet artillery thundered from the Pulkovo region, firing half a million rockets and shells at the enemy in the fiercest bombing of the war, causing windows to rattle and walls to shake in Leningrad, 20 kilometres further north.

### TANKS RUMBLED FORWARD

The massive barrage shocked the Germans. Field Marshal Küchler was well aware that the Soviet troops were superior in number, but he hadn't anticipated that the Red Army could co-ordinate such a major attack so effectively.

Nevertheless, the Germans retaliated the best they could, as the Red Army advanced with tank forces followed by artillery. From still-intact concrete bunkers, German 88-mm guns blasted at Soviet T-34 tanks, and the Soviet infantrymen who followed ran across burned-out vehicles and dead comrades. However, the Germans had no chance to stop the onslaught of tanks that soon spread out along the three 'prongs' that Govorov had planned.

The Soviet soldiers advanced through an almost surreal landscape, for the German evacuation of the area had left the villages empty of people. Everywhere, the troops saw ruins. Even the elegant Gatchina Palace, which had housed Catherine the Great and her court in the 18th century, was destroyed. The Germans had used the palace for accommodation during their siege of Leningrad, but now the building was burnt and its precious art collection looted.

The bodies of German soldiers lay in the snow, many of them having been run over by Red Army tanks. During the advance, the Soviet soldiers kept their courage up by singing or praying. One Soviet officer later described how he'd been trying to recall prayers that he'd learned as a child, but was unable to remember any.

The situation was unsustainable for the German troops, and on 22nd January, Field Marshal Küchler flew to Wolf's Lair in Poland to ask Hitler for permission to withdraw. The Führer refused, but nevertheless, the Germans continued their retreat to the west. By the end of the month, the Soviets had driven Küchler's units 100 km away from Leningrad.

On 27th January at 20.00, Stalin was finally able to declare the city completely liberated. The Red Army celebrated its victory over the German forces at Leningrad by firing 24 salvoes from 324 guns and launching flares and rockets that drew golden, red, white and blue tracks across the sky. The siege of almost 900 days was over.

"A task of great historical importance has been completed. The city of Leningrad has been completely freed of the enemy blockade and of the barbaric artillery shelling," said Govorov.

# The Red Army continued to Estonia

**The Soviets immediately followed up their victory at Leningrad with an advance against the Estonian city of Narva. But the battle for the city dragged on.**

After the victory, General Govorov went south-west, hot on the heels of the defeated German army. The Red Army's next goal was to invade Estonia, which the Soviet Union had annexed in 1940. The simplest way to get to Estonia was across the Baltic Sea, and to gain access to the sea, Soviet troops had to occupy the city of Narva, in the north-eastern corner of Estonia.

The Red Army managed to secure several bridges over the Narva River, but then the offensive stalled. The Germans put up a strong resistance and the Soviet troops had difficulty obtaining ammunition and supplies, because the German forces had destroyed their lines of communication. When spring arrived, the thaw set in and made the roads impassable. The fighting at Narva dragged on for six months. It wasn't until July 1944 that the Soviets broke the defences and took the city.

*Soviet artillery tried for six months to destroy the German positions at the Estonian city of Narva.*





*Lightning-quick attacks from hidden quarters saw the Red Army force the Germans to retreat 700 kilometres.*

1944 22<sup>ND</sup> JUNE





•  • OPERATION BAGRATION •  •

# GERMANS SENT PACKING BY RED ARMY BLITZKRIEG

Hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops sneaked through swampy marshes under cover of night to catch the Nazi occupiers in Belarus unawares. The Red Army, vastly superior in manpower and weapons, planned to surprise the Germans and drive them away from the Eastern Front once and for all.



## THE STAGE IS SET



The Red Army has been pushing the Germans back westwards for over a year, but Hitler's Army Group Centre still retains its iron grip on Belarus. Stalin and his generals have a plan, however: on the third anniversary of the German invasion, more than 2.3 million Soviet troops will push the Nazis out of Belarus for good.



**S**OLDIERS' BOOTS SANK DEEP into the swampy terrain as Red Army troops from General Ivan Bagramyan's 1st Baltic Front hauled their guns through the marshes to the north of the Belarusian city of Vitebsk. The smell of stagnant water rose in their nostrils as the men laid beams and bundles of wood among the reeds to create temporary roads for tanks. Elsewhere, other Red Army personnel busied themselves building rafts and sledges to ferry the guns across the water.

The men laboured heavily, cursing, but the soldiers knew the laborious route through the unforgiving landscape was their best chance of surprising the German defensive positions outside Vitebsk, which formed part of the German Army Centre's strong front across central Belarus. Surprise would play a crucial role in the upcoming offensive.

Before the attack on 23rd June 1944, Red Army soldiers secreted guns between bushes and trees, while engineering troops crawled cautiously through the enemy's minefields. With expert hands, they carefully unscrewed the detonators one at a time, while being careful to avoid German tripwires – even the smallest mistake would alert the enemy. Over the course of two nights, the men removed no fewer than 34,000 mines along the entire front. Once the final preparations were in place, the Soviets were ready to embark on one of the war's largest and most pivotal operations.

### HITLER EMBRACED THE SOVIET SCAM

As the spring rains fell in 1944, on either side of the front Hitler and Stalin pondered how they could defeat each other in the battles that awaited once the summer sun shone again over the Eastern Front. After the Red Army had forced the Germans backward to the Belarusian border during the second half of 1943, Hitler and his generals

had anxiously watched as Stalin's troops crossed the Dnieper River to push further and further into Ukraine.

So far, fighting on the Eastern Front had cost up to 1.25 million German lives, with a further three million wounded and half a million missing. The Luftwaffe, which in 1941 had laid

waste to the Soviet landscape and chased the enemy all the way back to Stalingrad, was now a shadow of its former self. It was so weak that German forces on the ground could rely on little more than cursory protection from the air.

A succession of defeats on the Eastern Front had eaten away at the German army's morale. But Army Group Centre was still a formidable foe, and Belarus remained under the tight control of Field Marshal Ernst Busch's troops, poking out in an easterly bulge along the German defensive line. The area went under the same name on both Soviet and German sides: "The Belarusian Balcony". Hitler did not expect any attack here – he was convinced that Stalin would continue his onslaught through Ukraine.

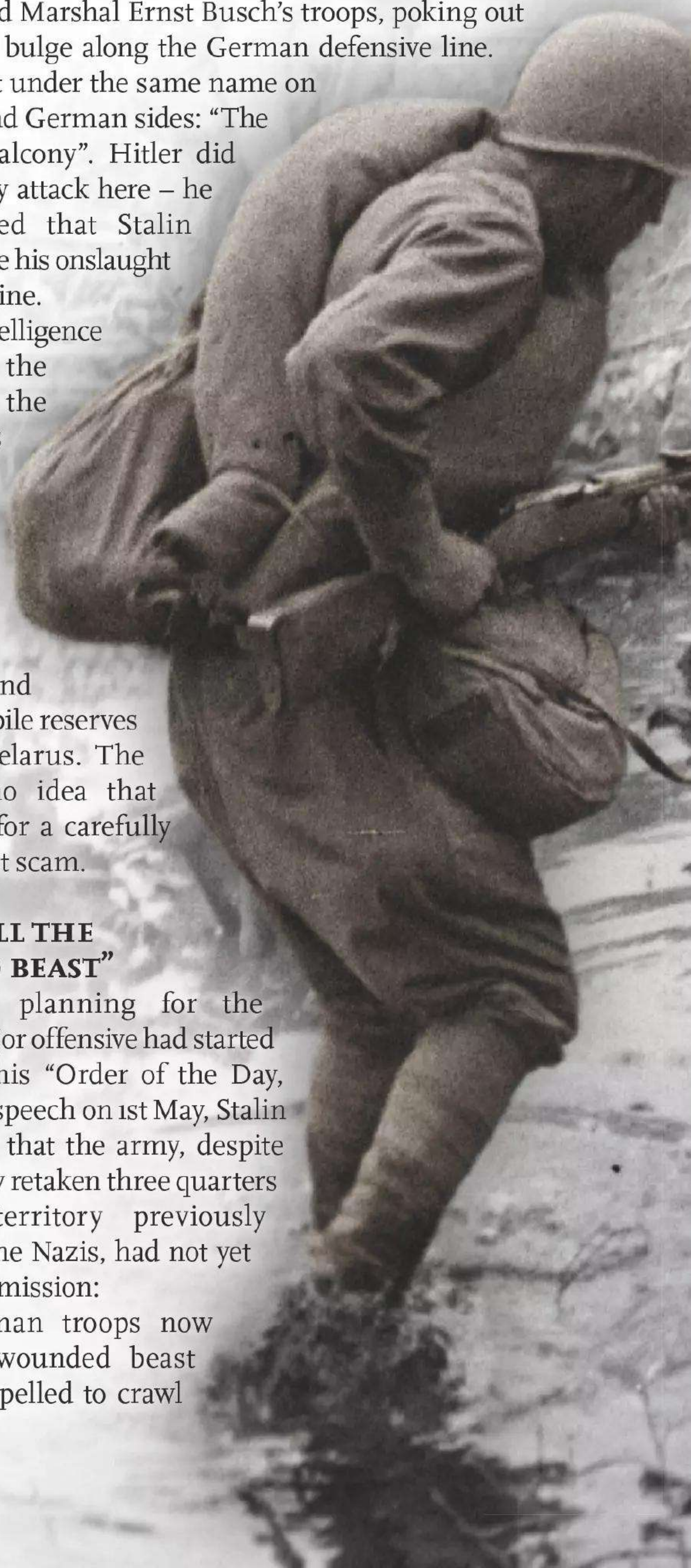
German intelligence reported in the spring that the Red Army was stepping up its activities in the south, and so the German High Command moved its mobile reserves away from Belarus. The Nazis had no idea that they'd fallen for a carefully planned Soviet scam.

### STALIN: KILL THE "WOUNDED BEAST"

In Moscow, planning for the summer's major offensive had started in April. In his "Order of the Day, Number 130" speech on 1st May, Stalin made it clear that the army, despite having already retaken three quarters of Soviet territory previously occupied by the Nazis, had not yet completed its mission:

"The German troops now resemble a wounded beast which is compelled to crawl

*Red Army infantry used shovels to fill sandbags and dig traps for enemy tanks.*





back to the frontiers of its lair – Germany – in order to heal its wounds. But a wounded beast which has retired to its lair does not cease to be a dangerous beast... The wounded German beast must be pursued close on its heels and finished off in its own lair," the Soviet dictator growled into his microphone.

Planning for Operation Bagration involved just five handpicked generals to ensure secrecy. The operation was named after a Georgian general who suffered a heroic death when Napoleon was expelled from Russia back in 1812. Now it was Hitler's turn. Four army fronts (the Soviet equivalent of an army group) would first surround the heavily fortified cities of Vitebsk and Babruysk. Once taken, they would overpower the Germans in the capital, Minsk, using another pincer movement. The strategy was to launch the attacks at around the same time to confuse the Germans over where to focus their defences. After capturing Minsk, the Red Army would continue to Poland.

Success depended on the Germans remaining ignorant of the plans for Operation Bagration, so they wouldn't strengthen their defences at the Belarusian border. Stavka, the Soviet High Command, employed the classic

Soviet *maskirovka* (military deception) strategy of transmitting an intricate web of misleading radio signals. In addition, the Soviets launched a fake attack on the Ukrainian front, which Hitler fell for. Stavka even co-ordinated the scam with Belarusian partisans, who avoided attacking German reserves heading south. Instead, they lay in wait with weapons cocked for the same troops who would soon be returning north.

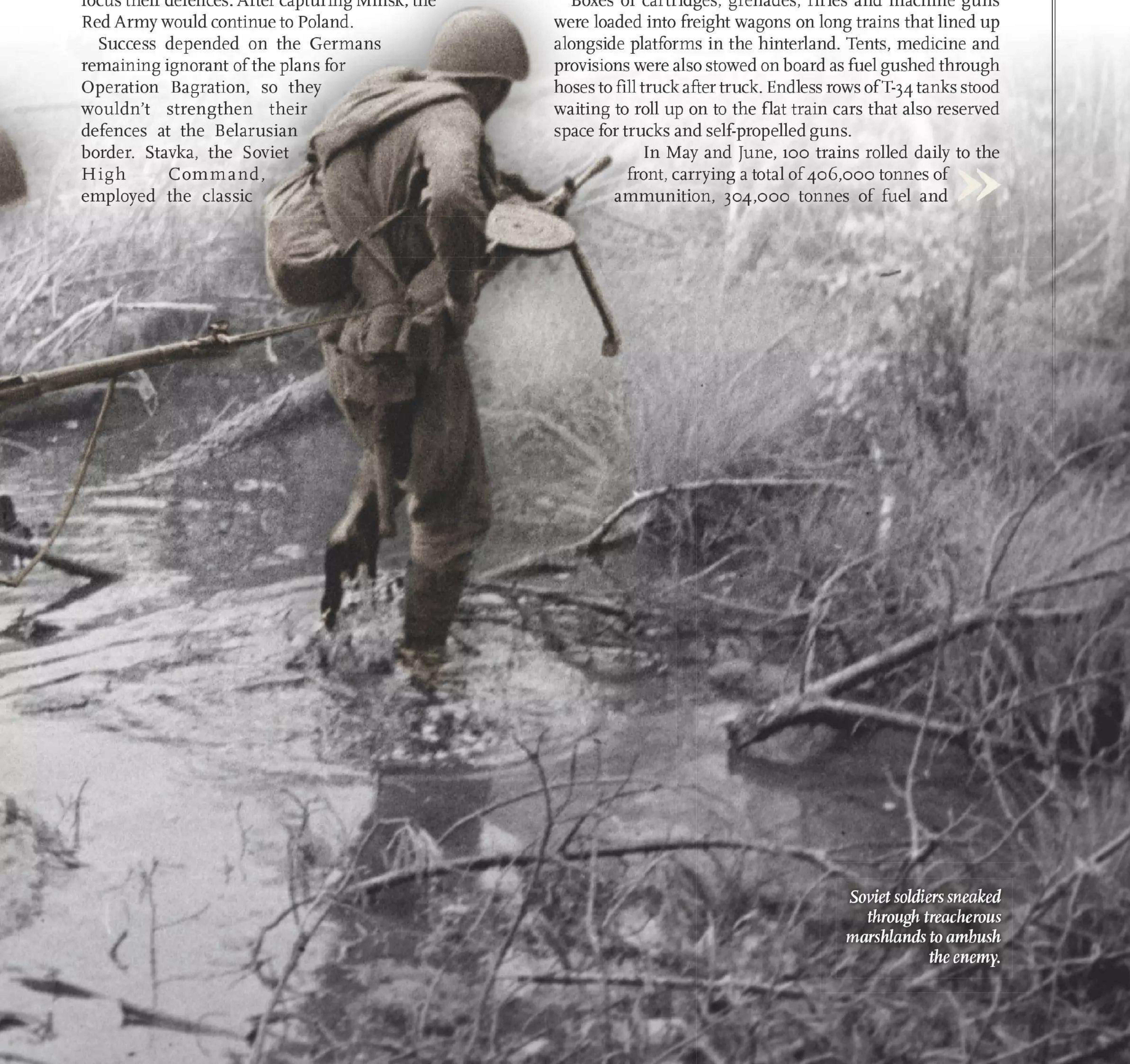
### SOVIET FORCES HID IN THE NIGHT

The trickiest part of the Soviet hoax was hiding the huge army as it made its way to the front. Over 2.3 million soldiers packed their bags to take part in one of the war's largest offensives. Complicating matters further, Stavka had decreed that the troops should be accompanied by five times the usual amount of ammunition to ensure they didn't run out of bullets.

Boxes of cartridges, grenades, rifles and machine guns were loaded into freight wagons on long trains that lined up alongside platforms in the hinterland. Tents, medicine and provisions were also stowed on board as fuel gushed through hoses to fill truck after truck. Endless rows of T-34 tanks stood waiting to roll up on to the flat train cars that also reserved space for trucks and self-propelled guns.

In May and June, 100 trains rolled daily to the front, carrying a total of 406,000 tonnes of ammunition, 304,000 tonnes of fuel and >>

*Soviet soldiers sneaked through treacherous marshlands to ambush the enemy.*





ADVANCEMENT

# OPERATION COMPLETED SOVIET COMEBACK

## 1943

**2ND FEBRUARY**

**Nazis capitulate at Stalingrad**

The last Germans in Stalingrad surrender after a Soviet pincer movement traps them in the city for six months.

**22ND AUGUST**

**Soviet troops advance on Ukraine**

Following the Battle of Kursk, the Red Army captures the Kharkov in eastern Ukraine.

**6TH NOVEMBER**

**The Germans lose Kiev**

At the Battle of the Dnieper, the Soviets occupy Kiev.



## 1944

**27TH JANUARY**

**Soviets liberate Leningrad**

The 890-day Nazi siege of Leningrad ends.

**1ST MARCH**

**The Red Army reaches the Baltics**

Germans are forced to finally abandon Leningrad when Soviet troops reach the Estonian border.

**10TH APRIL**

**Stalin's army advances south**

Soviet forces enter Romania.

**23RD JUNE**

**Pincer manoeuvre expels Germans from Belarus**

Operation Bagration is launched with an attack from four army fronts on the "Belarusian Balcony", territory occupied by Army Group Centre.

**3RD JULY**

**Blitzkrieg continues west**

Soviet troops capture the Belarusian capital, Minsk, before continuing to Riga in Latvia, Kaunas in Lithuania, and the Polish border.

**17TH JULY**

**Prisoners paraded in Moscow**

57,600 broken German prisoners of war are ordered to march through Moscow in a large procession.

508,000 tonnes of supplies; 6,500 freight cars were filled with ammunition alone.

When the trains arrived at their destination, trucks and tanks rolled quietly into the night darkness so German planes wouldn't discover the colossal forces assembling under their noses. Generals issued strict bans on turning on lights, so drivers painted white spots on the front and rear of their vehicles to prevent collisions. Along the roads, soldiers marked the way by knocking white poles into the ground, preventing tanks and trucks from crashing into ditches.

As dawn approached, drivers turned their vehicles into the woods and camouflaged them. Soviet patrol planes roared across the area every morning to check that nothing would reveal their advance. The tiniest amount of gun barrel or side mirror making itself visible resulted in a pennant being dropped to alert the troops to quickly add extra branches to their vehicle's cover.

Despite their best efforts, Soviet troops couldn't hide all activity, but they were able to mask their true intentions. Every morning, the Red Army diverted snakes of vehicles away from the Belarusian border – when the German pilots reported these moving caravans, Hitler and his general staff remained convinced the primary threat remained in Ukraine.

By mid-June, everything was almost in place, and the Soviet Union stood with an army numbering nearly three times as many men as Army Group Centre. At the same time, the Red Army had almost ten times the number of tanks and aircraft at its disposal.

"During three cruel years of war we have fought over distances of thousands of kilometres, in endless steppe lands, in forests and on the shattered streets of burnt-out cities... We have learnt to hate and love with ever greater intensity," wrote Major Vasily Ingor of the Soviet 308th Rifle Division on the eve of Operation Bagration.

## SOVIETS STORMED THE GERMAN TRENCHES

The advance infantry in Ivan Bagramyan's 1st Baltic Front lay hidden with beating hearts on the night of 23rd June, when they heard the distant drone of Soviet bombers. Soon the aircraft whizzed overhead before dropping their deadly cargo on to the



*Soviet troops moved west into Belarus with self-propelled guns and tanks.*



## Führer's pig-headedness cost soldiers dearly

Hitler's refusal to accept defeat, ordering troops to stand in 29 selected strongholds, became the final nail in the German coffin on the Eastern Front.

In March 1944, Hitler designated 29 cities along the Eastern Front as *Feste Plätze*, stretching from Tallinn in the north to the Black Sea port of Mykolaiv in the south. These strongholds served a dual role as both hubs in the lines of communication between armies as well as heavily fortified bastions defending the Eastern Front, to be held at all costs. A prominent German 9th Army general warned Hitler that far from strengthening the army, the points made it more vulnerable, as they impaired its mobility, but the Führer stuck to his *Feste Plätze*. Even as Soviet forces overpowered bastions such as the Belarusian cities of Vitebsk and Babruysk in record time, Hitler insisted the Wehrmacht defend the strongholds to the last man. The price of his decision was costly in human life – the slaughter continued until the Germans surrendered.

*Hitler gave orders to defend 29 cities along the Eastern Front. It cost 300,000 men their lives.*

enemy's positions. German anti-aircraft batteries responded with salvos that lit the sky up.

The deafening blasts unnerved the Soviet soldiers, who nevertheless left their hiding places to storm towards the German trenches. Although the engineering troops had cleared the first minefields, many attackers stepped on mines, their feet and legs ripped off. Alongside them, comrades fell to the ground, pierced by the German MG 42 machine guns that swung side to side like a pendulum as they strived to slaughter as many Soviets as possible.

As so often during the war, the Soviet blitzkrieg cost many men their lives, but as fast as they fell, new Red Army troops continued to flood forward, and during the night the infantry occupied more and more German trenches. As dawn broke, Ilyushin Il-2 ground-attack aircraft joined the fray, smashing into the German defences north of Vitebsk. The "Flying Tanks", as the troops dubbed them, managed to destroy a significant number of the Germans' heavy anti-aircraft guns by attacking from a height of just 25-50 metres.

South of Vitebsk, the 3rd Belarusian Front also gained ground quickly, and just over 24 hours later, General Georg-Hans Reinhardt, leading the 3rd Panzer Army, acknowledged that it was impossible to defend the city. But while the Soviets had surrounded Vitebsk, the ring was not yet closed.

"A breakout must be ordered at once! The encirclement will result not only in the loss of ammunition and food supplies, but also of the entire LIII Corps," urged a worried Reinhardt to Hitler's headquarters in Bavaria at 15.20 on 24th June.

After a general presented the situation to Hitler, he came back with a sobering, but unsurprising, response: "The Führer has decided that Vitebsk is to be held." Prior to

the fighting in Belarus, the Führer had designated 29 cities as *Feste Plätze* (strongholds – to be held at all costs). Vitebsk was one of them. Consequently, the Germans lost even more men before the last remaining 17,000 survivors finally surrendered on 27th June. The battle also ate into the defenders' already modest number of tanks and guns.

### CORPSES LAY EVERYWHERE IN BABRUYSK

On the southern flank of the Belarusian Balcony, Babruysk had been designated the Red Army's second target during the first phase of Operation Bagration. Like Vitebsk, it had been designated a *Feste Plätze* by Hitler, but it too failed to resist the overwhelming Soviet forces, which assailed it from two sides. General Konstantin Rokossovsky's 1st Belorussian Front, numbering over a million men, quite literally drummed its way forward using specialist T-34 tanks

*German soldiers dug in to try to hold the front against overwhelming odds.*



*Red Army generals Ivan Bagramyan and Vladimir Kurasov helped chart the course west.*





# Pincers crushed German defence

With an overwhelmingly superior army, Soviet troops smashed German defences, forcing the Wehrmacht back to the Polish border in just five short weeks. A series of strategic pincer manoeuvres effectively took the occupying power out of play on the Eastern Front.

## 5 The Red Army advances west

After victory in Minsk, Bagramyan's 1st Baltic Front moves north to Riga. Chernyakhovsky's 3rd Belorussian Front sets course for Lithuania, where it occupies the city of Kaunas. At the end of July, General Rokossovsky's 1st Belorussian Front reaches Poland.

Front on 15th August

Front on 22nd June

## 4 Minsk is surrounded

Soviet troops occupy the Belarusian capital, Minsk. On 3rd July, two army fronts attack simultaneously from both north and south, and after a quick victory, Minsk's population waves goodbye to the occupying power.

Soviet soldiers fire shells at German forces during the attack on Vitebsk in Belarus in June 1944.



## 1 1st Baltic Front attacks from the north

Soviet troops from the 1st Baltic Front, led by General Ivan Bagramyan, attack German defences north of the city of Vitebsk on 23rd June. The Red Army advances rapidly, but also loses many soldiers due to an initial lack of tank support.

## 2 500,000 soldiers attack Vitebsk

The 3rd Belorussian Front, with General Ivan Chernyakhovsky at its head, attacks Vitebsk from the south on 23rd June. By attacking from two sides at once, the army group – in co-operation with the 1st Baltic Front – traps German forces inside the city.

## 3 Attack from swamp area

South of the Belarusian Balcony, Konstantin Rokossovsky's million-strong army attacks the German 9th Army at Babruysk on 24th June. The 1st Belorussian Front crosses the Pinsk Marshes to hide its approach, surprising the enemy with a pincer movement.



Military-issue helmets protected the Red Army during its advance on Berlin.

fitted with mine rollers to prevent any men or vehicles from being blown up.

Planes, tanks and Katyusha rocket launchers pummelled the bastion, and on 28th June, Rokossovsky's troops triumphantly rolled into the blazing city.

"With difficulty, our car finds its way amid scorched and distorted German tanks and self-propelled guns. Men are walking over German corpses. Corpses, hundreds and thousands of them, pave the road, lie in ditches, under the pines, in the green barley. In some places, vehicles have to drive over the corpses, so densely they lie upon the ground," wrote Soviet journalist Vasily Grossman, who followed in the footsteps of one of Rokossovsky's armies.

Bodies weren't the only things filling Babruysk – almost 70,000 Germans remained trapped, either within the city or to the east of it. Their number included the 129th Infantry Division, which had been caught inside a forest to the south-east of Babruysk after the Soviet pincer manoeuvre. As the hours and day passed, the troops became ever more desperate.

"News has reached us of the fall of Vitebsk and Babruysk. The collapse of the entire central front now seems imminent... A dull apathy settles over people. For a while I just sit, drained and exhausted. For two days we have had nothing to eat," wrote Josef Perau, field chaplain for the division, the same day Babruysk fell. Two days later, his mood had not improved:

"The division – all of it that remains – is entirely focused on finding an escape route. Harassing fire from the enemy's planes and artillery has suddenly ceased, and an eerie silence hangs over the forest. Everyone is preoccupied by one unanswerable question: is there still a way out?"

## NEW PINCERS CLAMPED AROUND MINSK

While the chaplain and the remnants of the German 129th Infantry Division snuck away along hidden forest paths, the northern Soviet front advanced from Vitebsk towards Minsk, while Rokossovsky's forces thundered towards the capital from Babruysk in the south. Dust rose from the summer landscape as the T-34s rolled over the dry ground. Meanwhile, any German Tiger tanks unlucky enough to run into the onrushing army were forced to quickly surrender. No one now stood any chance against the Soviet tanks. The Red Army took less than a week to cross the 150 kilometres to Minsk, and on 3rd July, the hammer and sickle waved over the Belarusian capital. Another 80,000 members of Army Group Centre faced an uncertain fate as prisoners of war.

A few days earlier, as the catastrophic turn of events sank in, Hitler had ousted the army group's commander, Ernst Busch. He had fallen victim to Hitler's blind insistence on

Feste Plätze, but his successor, Walter Model, had no earthly chance of improving the situation. In less than two weeks, Army Group Centre had lost almost all its tanks and over a quarter of a million men. The battle was lost, but the rapid advance on Minsk was fortuitous for the

SOVIET UNION	
SOLDIERS:	2,329,400
TANKS:	5,200
HEAVY GUNS:	24,000
AIRCRAFT:	6,834

GERMANY	
SOLDIERS:	800,000
TANKS:	570
HEAVY GUNS:	9,500
AIRCRAFT:	839





*The Red Army demonstrated its victory by forcing 57,600 German prisoners to march through the streets of Moscow in "The Great Waltz". The Soviet public – and wider world – could now see with their own eyes a broken, dishevelled and defeated German army.*

field chaplain and troops from the 129th Infantry Division. They managed to make their way through Soviet lines by steering a path through the Pripyat swamps.

Now the German defence was no longer left standing, the Red Army ramped up the pace of its relentless advance west.

"We felt we were flying on the wings of victory. And everyone in our units, from ordinary soldiers to commanders, experienced this feeling – it was one of overwhelming triumph," said a Soviet infantryman.

The Red Army had exceeded even Stavka's highest expectations, and to highlight their success, Stalin ordered the army to load 57,600 prisoners of war into freight wagons and send them to Moscow. On 17th July 1944, under the code name Operation "The Great Waltz", Soviet troops forced prisoners to trudge through the streets of the capital, so its citizens and the rest of the world could see with their own eyes how the once formidable Wehrmacht was now a beaten force.

At the prisoners' head "waltzed" 19 German generals, followed by more than 1,000 officers, while at the back, unshaven and depressed soldiers followed, several barefoot on the hot summer pavements. Behind the rows of prisoners rolled Soviet trucks, which had water hoses fitted to their radiators for the occasion. They were to wash

away all traces of the Nazi occupiers from the streets of Moscow after their passing.

### NAZIS WERE EXPELLED FROM THE SOVIET UNION

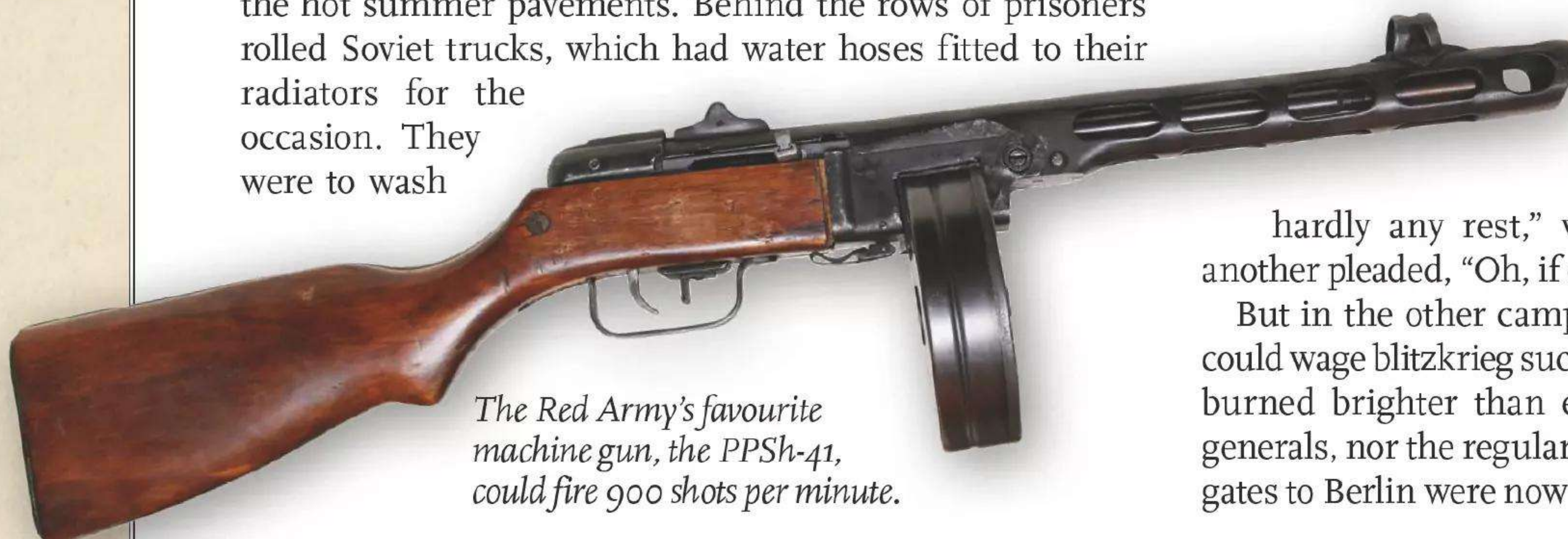
After the parade in Moscow, Operation Bagration continued rapidly westwards for another spectacularly successful month. General Bagramyan set his troops on course to Riga on the Baltic coast, while the 3rd Belorussian Front occupied the Lithuanian city of Kaunas in early August. Thus, the German Army Group North found itself cut off in the Baltics and out of action. Rokossovsky continued to thunder through Belarus and soon reached the city of Lublin in Poland. At the same time, T-34 tanks rolled towards Warsaw. During Operation Bagration, Stalin's armies would move almost 700 kilometres closer to Hitler's bunker in Berlin.

To the south, the 1st Ukrainian Front launched the Lvov-Sandomierz offensive, which quickly pushed the Germans out of Ukraine. Except for a few isolated spots in the Baltic states, the swastika had been banished from Soviet territory by the autumn of 1944. It was all thanks to Operation

Bagration, whose success in delivering the fatal blow to Army Group Centre had punctured the German defensive line.

"We are in constant action – there is hardly any rest," wrote one German soldier, while another pleaded, "Oh, if only this mess would end!"

But in the other camp, the Red Army had proved that it could wage blitzkrieg successfully, and the Soviets' confidence burned brighter than ever. No one – neither Stalin, his generals, nor the regular soldiers – was in any doubt that the gates to Berlin were now open.



*The Red Army's favourite machine gun, the PPSH-41, could fire 900 shots per minute.*



# Offensive left Army Group Centre in ruins

Germany's Army Group Centre had served as Hitler's steadfast guard on the Eastern Front, but Operation Bagration destroyed two-thirds of its strength.

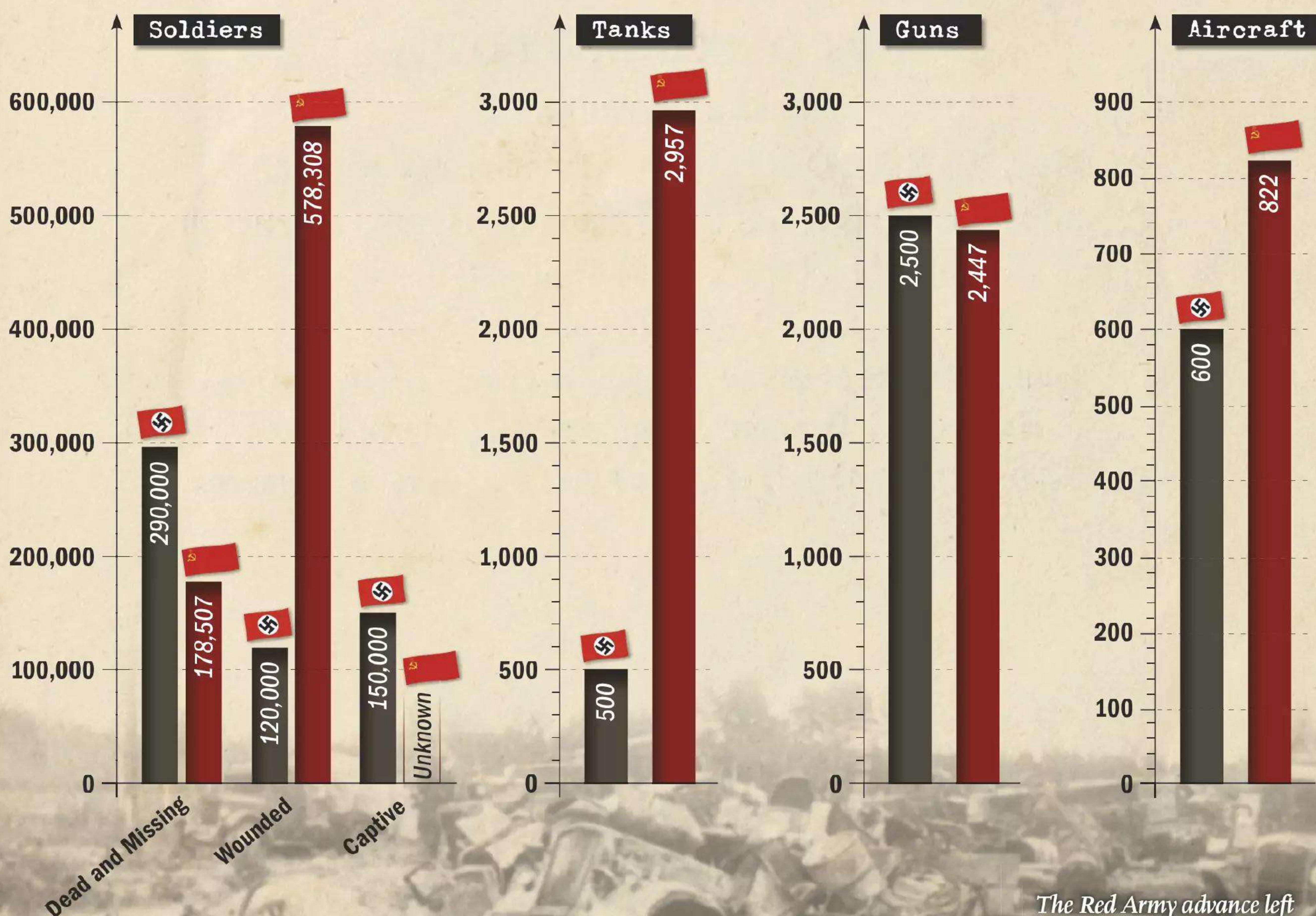


Until June 1944, Army Group Centre had controlled Belarus with an iron fist. But within just 12 days of the start of Operation Bagration, it was reduced to a shadow of its former self. The group lost no fewer than 300,000 men, and only 30 percent of German troops from the previously formidable unit survived the Soviet offensive. The operation is today

considered one of the war's most important because it wiped out a significant number of German officers and generals. In addition, almost all German tanks were lost. Although the Red Army lost far more men and equipment, the losses were far less significant on that side of the front as there was a seemingly inexhaustible supply of Soviet troops and weapons.

## Losses during Operation Bagration

■ Soviet Union  
■ Germany



*The Red Army advance left a trail of smashed German equipment in its wake.*



• • VISTULA-ODER OFFENSIVE • •

# THE RED ARMY STRIKES A DECISIVE BLOW

In January 1945, over two million Russian soldiers head west from positions on the Vistula River and the East Prussian border. Stalin's taken the decisive step into the Third Reich and now targets the country's capital. En route, Russian soldiers will take a terrible vengeance on the German population.

1945 12<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY



*A Red Army tank crosses the River Oder  
in February 1945, while Russian soldiers  
who have been relieved at the Front  
march in the opposite direction.*





## THE STAGE IS SET



In early 1945, the Red Army stands on the west bank of the Polish river Vistula after a two-year push. Soldiers await permission to advance through Poland and into Germany. On 12th January the order comes from Stalin and the Russians move towards the sparsely occupied German positions that are feeling the pressure.



**T**HE SUN HAD NOT YET RISEN, but in the darkness, the soldiers in Marshal Ivan Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front could see their breath forming small clouds in the bitter cold. Comrades pulled up their collars to protect their necks and chins from the driving snow as they towed guns into position. There were bridgeheads all along the Front at Baranów, 230 kilometres south of Warsaw, and the snow had been compressed by heavy artillery to create a slippery surface that caused problems for the soldiers in their clumsy army boots. It had been a long wait on the west side of the Vistula River, but now in the early morning of 12th January, the Red Army was ready to attack German positions.

The Russian artillery was packed tightly along the Front, with up to 300 guns per kilometre. At 04.35, the guns rained

shells down on the German forces that were entrenched in three defensive lines, one behind the other.

After half an hour's bombardment, the Soviet battalions stormed the German trenches, shooting anyone who survived the inferno. Specialist units scouted behind enemy lines to try and identify surviving strongholds. Their observations were sent directly back to Konev's artillery units, which targeted a new volley of shells directly at those positions. German officers were left in despair:

"I began the operation with an understrength battalion", German battalion commander Reinhardt Müller said later. "After the smoke of the Soviet preparation cleared... I had only a platoon of combat-effective soldiers left".

As day dawned in his bunker on the Baranów Front, Müller was aware that he and his countrymen on the Polish defence line would find it increasingly difficult to keep the Red Army at bay. The Russians had begun their onslaught against the





German motherland, and the countdown to the Third Reich's collapse had begun.

### STALIN HEADED TO THE ODER RIVER

The Russians had captured the bridgehead at Baranów back in the late summer of 1944, towards the end of Operation Bagration. The Red Army had expelled the Germans from Belarus and eastern Poland, and Russian soldiers had crossed the Vistula – Poland's largest river – at several points, seizing important bridgeheads south of Warsaw. Since Bagration, the Front had remained relatively quiet, but German generals were in no doubt that it would not be long before the guns were rumbling again on the Eastern Front.

Stalin, however, wanted to postpone the attack until the cold winter had frozen the ground like cement. This would allow Russian T34 tanks to easily roll out to the Oder River and finally penetrate Germany. This meant that the so-called Vistula-Oder Offensive could not kick off before January 1945. Until then, the Red Army would move their forces and equipment to the three bridgeheads on the Vistula's West Bank, from where the attack would begin.

The deployment followed the maskirovka ("masking") strategy to mislead the enemy. Tanks and mobile artillery crept up to the Front under the cover of night with thousands of trucks full of ammunition and supplies. At the same time, the Russians tried to fool the Germans into focusing on an area north of Warsaw through fake radio messages and by establishing a ghost army consisting of 1,000 imitation tanks and other vehicles.

The Nazis' intelligence service – the Abwehr – was in no doubt that the Red Army would soon launch an



NAME

**IVAN STEPANOVICH KONEV**

TITLE

MARSHAL, COMMANDER OF 1ST UKRAINIAN FRONT

#### Lumberjack was Stalin's super warrior

With little schooling, Ivan Konev joined the army at 18. 10 years later, after becoming an officer, his military career gained momentum. Konev was given a significant role in the defence of Moscow and other offensives following the Battle of Stalingrad. He was admired for his frequent use of dummy manoeuvres and ended up as one of Stalin's favourite generals.

- Was a lumberjack before entering the military.
- Was Deputy Defence Minister in 1946.



1897-1973



NAME

**FERDINAND SCHÖRNER**

TITLE

COLONEL GENERAL, CHIEF OF ARMY GROUP A

#### Top Nazi treated soldiers brutally

Ferdinand Schörner was a staunch Nazi who ended the war one of Hitler's favourite officers. The Führer particularly valued Schörner's strict handling of his troops, especially during the Vistula-Oder offensive. The general was hard on malingerers and soldiers who left their post. Without trial, deserters were hanged along the roadside as a warning to other Germans.

- Was nicknamed "Bloody Ferdinand".
- Was imprisoned in West Germany in 1958.

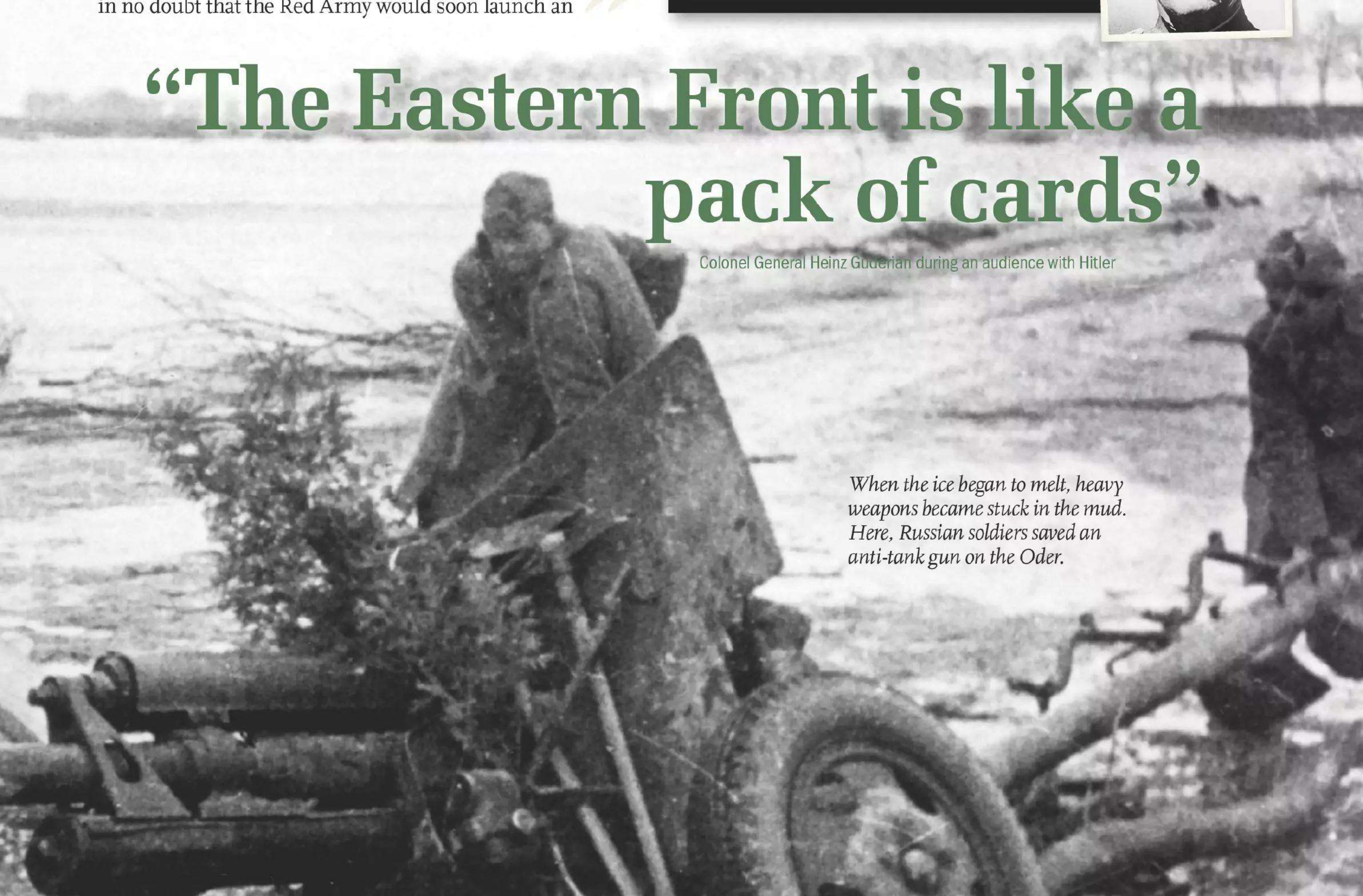


1892-1973

# "The Eastern Front is like a pack of cards"

Colonel General Heinz Guderian during an audience with Hitler

*When the ice began to melt, heavy weapons became stuck in the mud. Here, Russian soldiers saved an anti-tank gun on the Oder.*





# The Red Army stormed toward the German capital

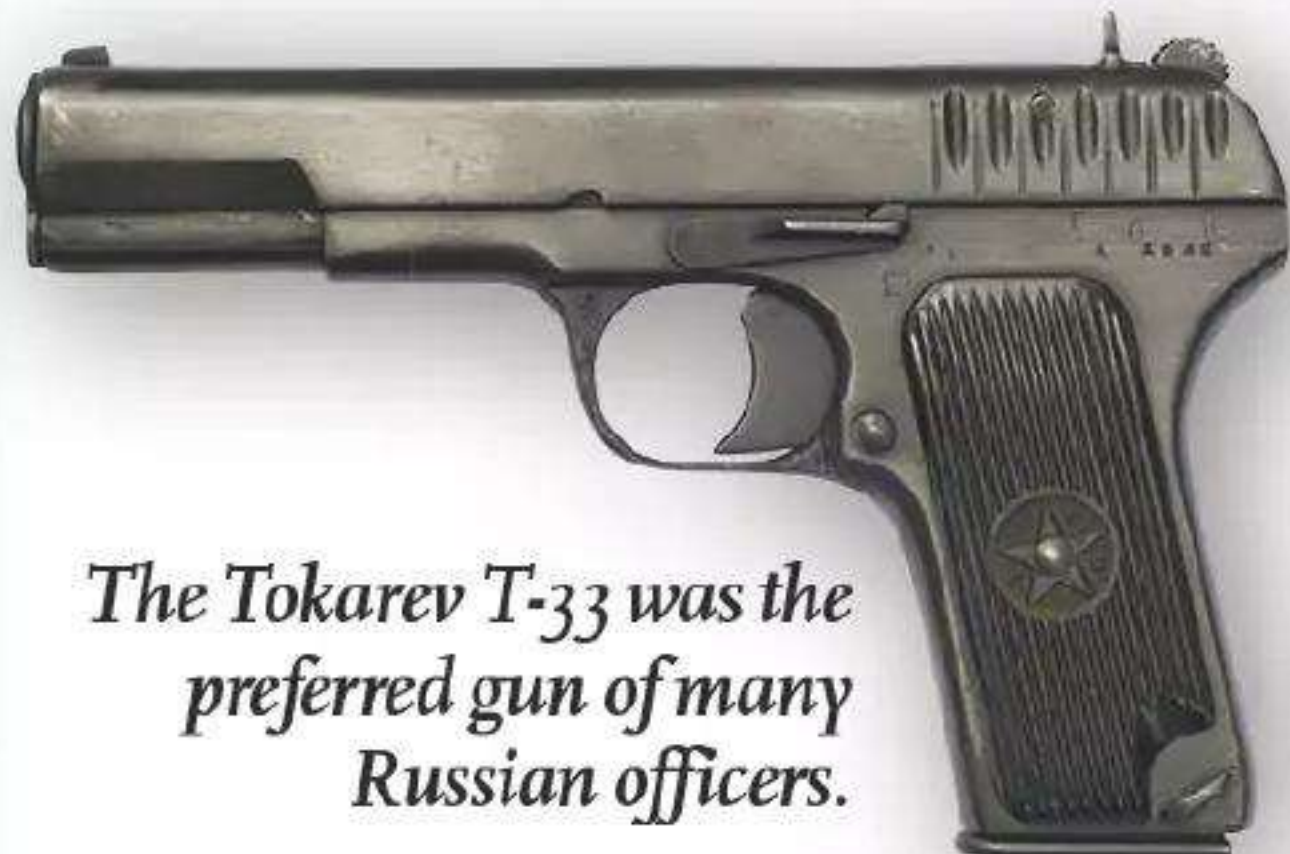
The Vistula-Oder offensive was the central thrust of the Russian winter offensive in 1945, but was supplemented by attacks in East Prussia and Pomerania. Three weeks after the operation launched, the Red Army stood just 70 kilometres from Berlin.

## 6 Stalin prepares for an attack on Berlin

**31st March:** the Red Army has established a strong, wide front on the Oder. With the flanks secured prior to the march on Berlin, Stalin gives orders to Konev and Zhukov to prepare the offensive against the German capital.

## 5 Russians on the Oder river

**31st January:** Zhukov's troops reach the Oder river. The Red Army is just 70 kilometres from Berlin, but Stalin does not want the army to continue towards the German capital before the troops have formed a long front along the Oder.



The Tokarev T-33 was the preferred gun of many Russian officers.

Oder was the target for the Russian's winter offensive.

## BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA

## 4 Polish cities are freed

**From 17th to 19th January:** German troops evacuate the Polish capital, Warsaw; over the next two days Kraków and Łódź fall into Russian hands.

## 3 Zhukov's advance picks up speed

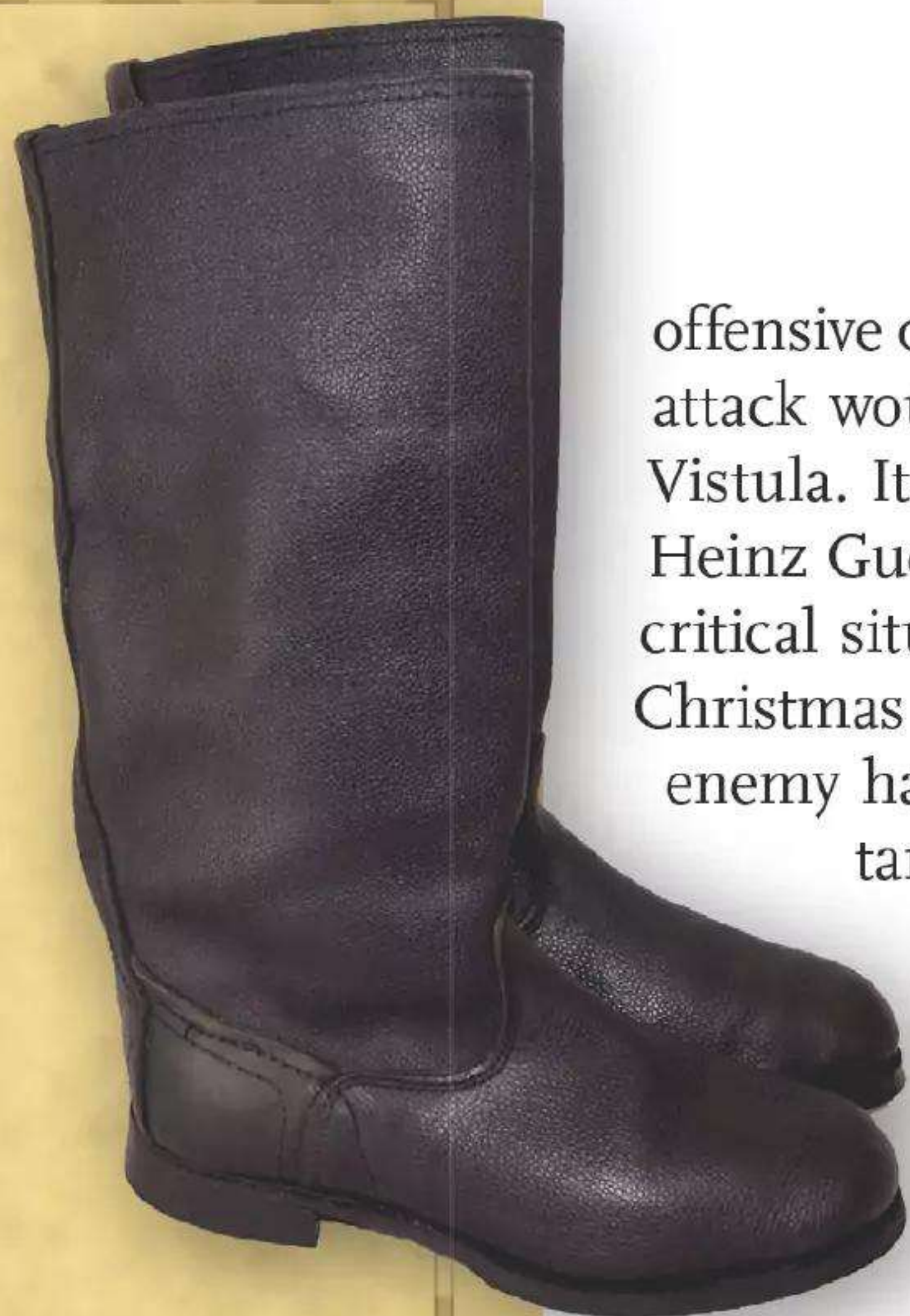
**14th January:** at 08:30 Marshal Georgy Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front attacks Magnuszew and Pulawy. An initial bombardment helps Russians advance 30 kilometres on the first day.



Vehicles from the Red Army cross the Vistula River near Warsaw on 18th January, 1945.



A lack of leather forced the Russians to produce their Sapogi – or high – boots from imitation leather known as Kirza SK. By the end of the war, around 10 million soldiers were wearing the boots.



## SOVIET UNION

### 1 Konev uses artillery to crush defence

**12th January:** Marshal Ivan Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front launches a massive bombardment from its bridgehead at Baranów on German defensive positions at 04:35. The Germans quickly withdraw.

### 2 Russians invade East Prussia

**13th January:** The 3rd Belorussian Front initiates the Soviet offensive in East Prussia, later joined by the 2nd Belorussian Front. Many of the region's 3.5 million German civilians begin a frenzied escape to the west.

• PULAWY

0 50 100 150 200 250 km

The Front ran along the Vistula to the south until the winter offensive.

Georgy Zhukov

offensive on the Eastern Front, and that the obvious point of attack would be the bridgeheads on the west bank of the Vistula. It was the job of Generaloberst (Colonel General) Heinz Guderian, Chief of Staff of the Army, to present the critical situation to Hitler at the Führer's headquarters on Christmas Eve, 1944. Guderian and his men believed that the enemy had 11 times more infantry, seven times as many tanks and an air force 20 times greater than the Wehrmacht could mobilise.

"It's the greatest imposture since Genghis Khan!" Hitler shouted before dismissing the report completely. "Who's responsible for producing all this rubbish?"

No significant redeployment of troops occurred. Hitler wasn't persuaded in the New Year either when General Josef Harpe, commander of Army Group A on the Wisla Front, asked for permission to pull his advanced positions back to safer lines. The Führer refused to accept the Russians' superiority, and remain unmoved even when – on 9th January – Guderian delivered one final bleak assessment when he met up with Hitler again: "The Eastern Front is like a pack of cards", Guderian argued. "If the front is broken through at one point all the rest will collapse".

### KONEV BROKE THROUGH BARANÓW

Just three days later, on 12th January, the load-bearing card came crashing down when Marshal Konev broke through the bridgehead at Baranów and crushed the Germans' triple line of defence. The headquarters of the German 4th Panzer Army was destroyed by noon, and when the Russian infantry stormed the trenches and rubble, the surviving Germans fled in panic from their positions. Meanwhile, Konev's 4th Tank Army crashed through the area's snowy forests, and by the afternoon the Wehrmacht was forced back almost 20 kilometres.

The situation was aggravated further by Josef Harpe's forces along the Vistula's defence line when the Red Army opened a new front on the bridgeheads Pulawy and Magnuszew just south of Warsaw. With the same efficiency as Konev's troops delivered, Georgy Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front bombarded its way

#### SOVIET UNION

SOLDIERS:	2,203,000
AIRCRAFT:	5,000
GUNS:	21,212

#### GERMANY

SOLDIERS:	450,000
AIRCRAFT:	270
GUNS:	5,250



# Russians copied enemy equipment

Throughout the war, the Russians improved their weapons, uniforms and other equipment by copying enemy designs. By spring 1945, the Red Army was well-equipped.

**"Ushanka" fur hat** with flaps that protected ears from the cold.

**"Telogreika" body warmer jacket** was padded with cotton wool.

**Armoured division sergeant**

**PPSh-41 submachine gun**, had magazine with 35 bullets and weighed 4.3 kg.

**Steel helmet, 1940 model:** an improved version of the earlier 1936 model and easier to manufacture.

**TT-30 pistol** had a magazine with eight shots and a range of 50 metres.

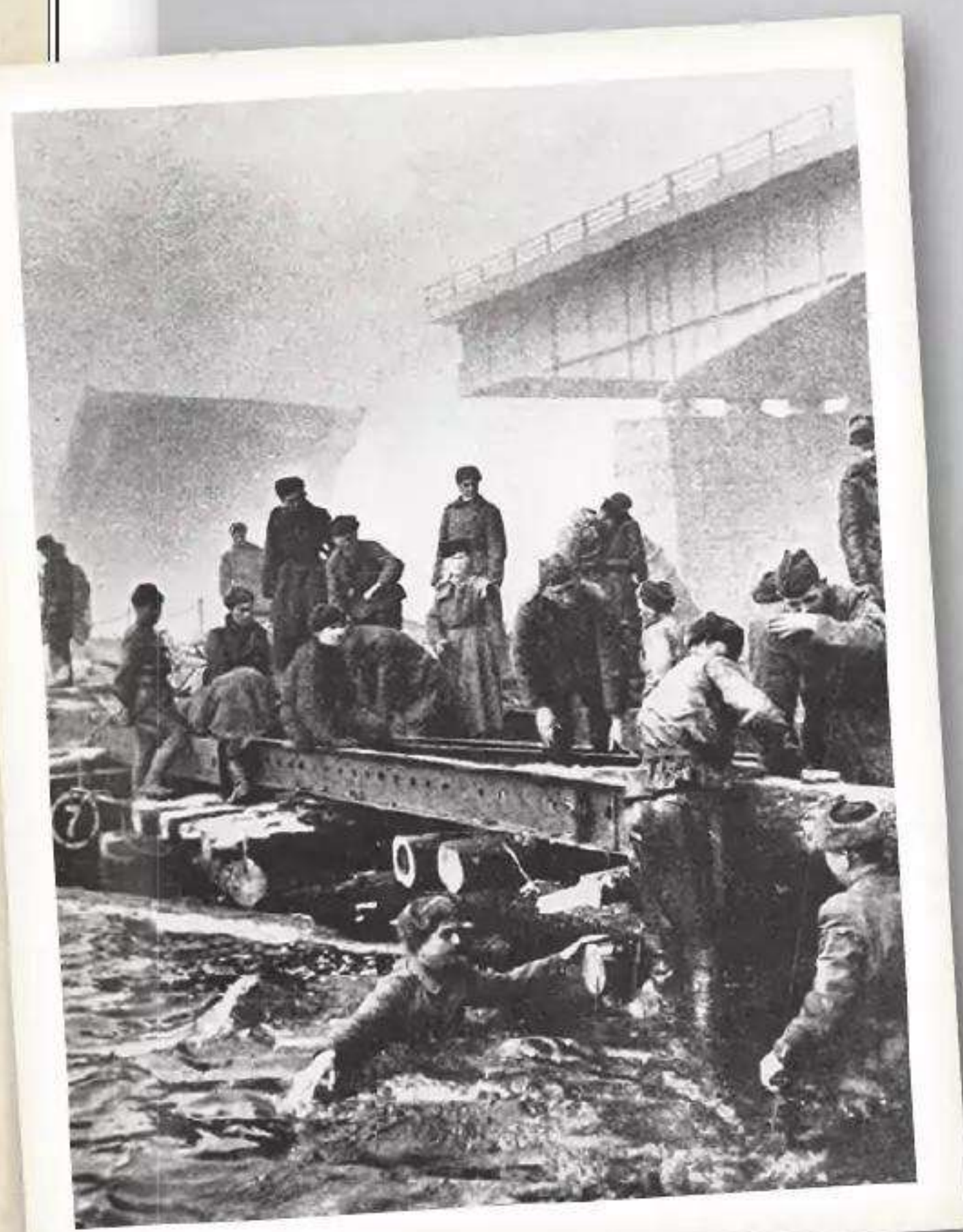
**Artillery lieutenant**

**Overcoats** were part of both soldiers' and officers' winter uniforms.

**Long leather boots** were issued to Red Army officers after 1943.

**RPG-1 anti-tank rocket** was a copy of the German Panzerfaust.

UNIFORMS



Russian troops established a beachhead on the western bank of the Oder in January 1945.

through the enemy's defence on 14th January, and three days later, T34-tanks rolled into Warsaw unopposed. The Germans evacuated the Polish capital, which was unrecognisable after years of occupation and massacre. Only 162,000 of Warsaw's original 1.31 million inhabitants remained.

## RUSSIANS ONLY THOUGHT OF REVENGE

As the Vistula-Oder offensive swept across Poland, Soviet forces also penetrated north into East Prussia, where about 3.5

million Germans lived. It was vital to secure the Vistula-Oder offensive's northern flank to prevent a German attack on Zhukov and Konev's oncoming troops from the north. At the same time, a Russian campaign in East Prussia and Pomerania closed Hitler's supply ports in the Baltic Sea.

For German civilians, the sound of Russian guns was a signal to flee quickly. Propaganda Minister Goebbels had warned his countrymen that enemy soldiers were barbarian hordes only interested in destruction and revenge. Therefore,

# "You are now on German soil. The hour of revenge has struck!"

Russian propaganda poster in East Prussia



hundreds of thousands of Prussians packed their most important belongings in small carts and walked towards the Oder and Berlin. Elderly people, women and children dragged themselves through the freezing snow in temperatures of -30 degrees.

The propaganda machine in Moscow did everything possible to provoke the Red Army into living up to its fearsome reputation. It promoted vengeance on the back of the German army's atrocities during the invasion of the Soviet Union. Millions of Russian soldiers and civilians were killed by Hitler's troops, who had also decimated Russian cities by destroying millions of buildings, including 84,000 schools and 40,000 hospitals.

Russian propaganda always referred to Berlin as "the lair of the fascist beast", and when soldiers crossed the border into Germany, they were greeted by posters reading "Soldier: You are now on German soil. The hour of revenge has struck!"

Hatred of the Germans escalated. "A couple of times, when entering houses, we found old people in them who had been murdered by our troops. Once I found a woman lying on a bed with a bayonet in her chest. What had happened to her? We left without asking", said Soviet scout Mikhail Baitman. He also admitted that, "Our unit made no distinction between enemy soldiers and civilians".

"The war turned us into beasts. The Germans showed us how to behave like animals, and for three years they had 'school'ed us well'... Now we were following suit. I was a Jew, and I learnt all about their barbaric cruelty. I felt not a shred of pity – only hatred. A desire to kill every last one of them".

### ZHUKOV CREATES A WIDE FRONT ON THE ODER

Within a week, Zhukov's troops had liberated Łódź, while Konev captured Kraków to the south. Two weeks later, both of the giant armies reached the German border, which twisted and turned around 70 kilometres east of the Oder.

War correspondent Vasily Grossman was hot on the heels of Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Front when the troops invaded the German city of Schwerin an der Warthe. Here, soldiers tore the clothes from the town's women in front of their families.

"Women's screams are heard from open windows", recounted Grossmann, who also saw a nursing mother



*German propaganda called for soldiers to fight to the last person at Frankfurt an der Oder.*

dragged into a barn, where Russian soldiers raped her. "Her relatives came to the barn and asked her attackers to let her have a break, because the hungry baby was crying the whole time", wrote the correspondent.

German soldiers left to defend their fellow countrymen were scared witless. They knew they were targets for the larger Soviet Army, and there were reports of German soldiers wearing women's clothes or Russian uniforms to avoid capture or death.

Hitler found their poor attempts to defend the country disgraceful, and in an attempt to halt the Russian advance he replaced Josef Harpe as Army Group A commander with Ferdinand Schörner. Schörner was chosen because he had always shown support for Hitler, but on the battlefield, he could do little with his demoralised units.

### CAPTURED TREASURY WAS COMPLETELY LOOTED

The Red Army rolled on through the winter landscape at high speed, and on 27th January Marshal Zhukov could taste victory with such certainty that he informed the Soviet High Command that the Germans no longer had a single line of defence. Army Group A was split, and four days later – on the 12th anniversary of Hitler's coming to power – soldiers from one of Zhukov's armies navigated across the ice that covered the River Oder. The creaking ice was only just thick enough to support the soldiers, and under cover of darkness they sneaked across the river and captured the town of Kienitz.

From their new position on the Oder, the Russians could almost glimpse the German capital Berlin, which was now 70 kilometres to the west. In the days before 2nd February, Zhukov established positions along the middle of the Oder.

Zhukov wanted to launch an assault on Berlin immediately, but Stalin gave the order to halt the march to the west. The rapid three-week advance from the Vistula to the Oder had led to supply issues. The Polish and German rail network tracks were narrower than Soviet ones, and military



*Soldiers from a German unit defend Oder with a light machine gun.*



# “Their [German military units] value is shockingly low”

General Colonel Ferdinand Schörner to Hitler

engineers began to expand the tracks to allow supply trains through. And trucks rolled through the captured territory with equipment to strengthen the Front.

Traffic also flowed in the opposite direction. Convoys of trucks loaded with war booty returned eastward to the Soviet Union. Russian soldiers didn't hold back when they looted Polish and German homes taking anything of value.

“[The Germans] started this war, so it is only right that we should now take their possessions”, a Russian lieutenant noted in his diary. Clocks, porcelain and fur were particularly sought after, but clothes, boxes of nails, tools and window glass were all sent to the impoverished Soviet Union too.

In March, Konev's troops managed to capture something else of great importance: the Upper Silesian Industrial Region. During the winter offensive, Stalin had specifically pointed to the spot on a map while he looked at Konev and said one word: “Gold!” The Russian occupation of the industrial area meant that Nazi Germany was cut off from vital raw materials that could keep its ailing war machine going. A German counterattack in Silesia was easily repulsed, and even the loyal Schörner had difficulty hiding his pessimism.

“I must report that the military incapacity of the German units exceeds my worst fears. Almost without exception,

they're exhausted... Their value is shockingly low... My impression is that the Russians can do what they want, without much effort”, stated Schörner's message to the Führer on 20th March.

With the German army falling apart and the Russians standing at the Oder near Berlin, most Germans knew that the country was defeated. Hitler refused to surrender, despite the fact that the critical situation struck deeply into his previously indomitable faith in Germany's racial superiority. It was in one of the Führer's letters to armaments minister Albert Speer where it became clear. When Speer pointed out that Hitler would be “eliminating all further possibility for the German people to survive”, Hitler replied:

“This nation will have proved itself the weaker and the future will belong exclusively to the stronger Eastern nation. Those who remain alive after the battles are over are in any case only inferior persons, since the best have fallen”. Hitler did not care about his country's fate and had no desire to spare Germans who hadn't lived up to his ideals.

From their posts on the Oder, the Russians prepared a decisive campaign into “the lair of the fascist beast” in Berlin: and the German people wouldn't be spared this time either.



Concentration camp prisoners leaving Auschwitz, supported by a Russian military doctor.

## Konev's soldiers liberated Auschwitz

The Red Army reached Auschwitz concentration camp in January 1945. Many of the soldiers had difficulty coping with meeting the victims.

Konev's forces would never forget the sight that greeted them in southern Poland on 27th January, 1945. After the troops had moved through the snowy forests, they came to the concentration camp at Auschwitz, which had recently been abandoned by evacuated personnel.

There were 3,000 prisoners left there, many resembling living skeletons. The Russians found many couldn't be saved – those dying adding to the 1.1 million already killed at the camp by the Nazis.

Soviet commander Anatoly Shapiro recalled what he saw when he first arrived: “When I opened the barrack, I saw blood, dead people, and in between them, women still alive and naked. It stank; you couldn't stay a second... The soldiers from my battalion asked me, ‘Let us go. We can't stay. This is unbelievable’ ... People in the barracks were naked, or [had] just thin clothes, no shoes, in the freezing cold; it was January”.



# Stalin hesitated to attack Berlin

Stalin wanted to reinforce his flanks and control the area around the Oder before he would countenance an offensive against Berlin. The first order to storm the German capital came in April.

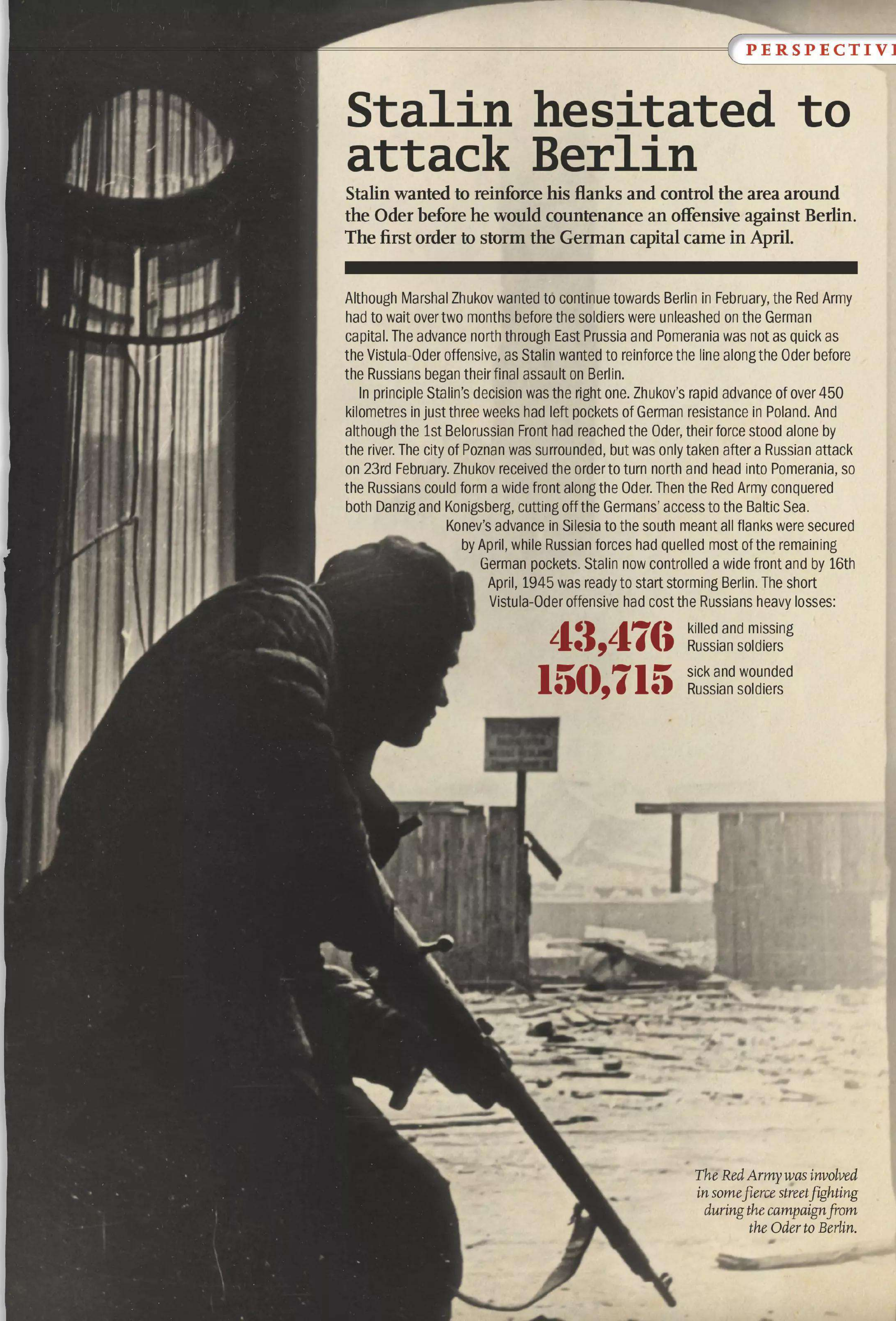
Although Marshal Zhukov wanted to continue towards Berlin in February, the Red Army had to wait over two months before the soldiers were unleashed on the German capital. The advance north through East Prussia and Pomerania was not as quick as the Vistula-Oder offensive, as Stalin wanted to reinforce the line along the Oder before the Russians began their final assault on Berlin.

In principle Stalin's decision was the right one. Zhukov's rapid advance of over 450 kilometres in just three weeks had left pockets of German resistance in Poland. And although the 1st Belorussian Front had reached the Oder, their force stood alone by the river. The city of Poznan was surrounded, but was only taken after a Russian attack on 23rd February. Zhukov received the order to turn north and head into Pomerania, so the Russians could form a wide front along the Oder. Then the Red Army conquered both Danzig and Königsberg, cutting off the Germans' access to the Baltic Sea.

Konev's advance in Silesia to the south meant all flanks were secured by April, while Russian forces had quelled most of the remaining German pockets. Stalin now controlled a wide front and by 16th April, 1945 was ready to start storming Berlin. The short Vistula-Oder offensive had cost the Russians heavy losses:

<b>43,476</b>	killed and missing Russian soldiers
<b>150,715</b>	sick and wounded Russian soldiers

*The Red Army was involved in some fierce street fighting during the campaign from the Oder to Berlin.*







•  • BOMBS TERRORISE GERMANY •  •

# FIREBOMBING LEAVES DRESDEN IN RUINS

On 13th February, 1945 around 22.00, the RAF attacks the German city of Dresden. In the space of eight minutes, incendiary bombs rain down over the city igniting an all-consuming firestorm. Thousands die, and more are still fleeing through the streets when the planes return hours later with a second deadly load.

1945  
13<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY





*A statue on top of Dresden's city hall gazed mournfully on the ruined old town, which Allied bombers had destroyed.*



## THE STAGE IS SET

➤➤ The German offensive in the Ardennes in December 1944 has shaken the Allies. British and US commanders decide to retaliate by launching a massive bombing raid against a major German city that hasn't yet been affected, in order to devastate the morale of the German populace. The target is chosen: Dresden.



**I**T WAS LATE IN THE EVENING OF 13TH FEBRUARY, 1945. The night air was cool, and light clouds drifted across the southern German city of Dresden. The city's inhabitants had celebrated Shrove Tuesday on a spring-like day, but as they made their way home from the famous cafés dotted along the river Elbe the idyll was broken.

At 21.51, the air sirens began to wail. They'd sounded often during the past five years of war, but each time it had been a false alarm. Although the city folk never seriously believed that Dresden's beautiful baroque buildings would be targeted, children and adults dashed through the Old Town's cobbled streets to their shelters and cellars.

10 minutes later, the first British squadrons – the Pathfinders – dove towards Dresden to drop target flares ahead of the main assault. At this moment, Dresden's civilians realised that it wasn't only factories and railway installations being attacked, but the city's historical centre too.

A shrill voice crackled over the radio, urging people to urgently seek cover. High above Dresden, British bomber squadrons flew unchallenged over the suburbs. Four hours previously, 255



*Pilots' sunglasses remained in their cases while Dresden was bombed under cover of darkness.*

aircraft had left British airspace, but despite the long journey, they'd encountered virtually no resistance.

The first bomber, named U for Uncle, opened its hatches at 22.14. "Bombs gone", the radio sounded as the deadly payload tumbled out of the plane's belly. Thousands of frightened citizens gathered in their basements and shelters, praying, crying and holding on to each other tightly.

## BOMBER TRIGGERS FIRESTORM

Planes flew over Dresden's centre at a rate of one every seven seconds. Endless whistling cut through the air before deafening explosions rang out. The pressure generated blew up iron doors, left buildings trembling and saw plaster rattle down walls; then followed the incendiary bombs.

"It felt as if someone directly above me was shaking out coal or potatoes onto the roof", said schoolgirl Nora Lang, who hid terrified in her family's apartment block basement. "Then sometimes would come this hissing and an explosion".

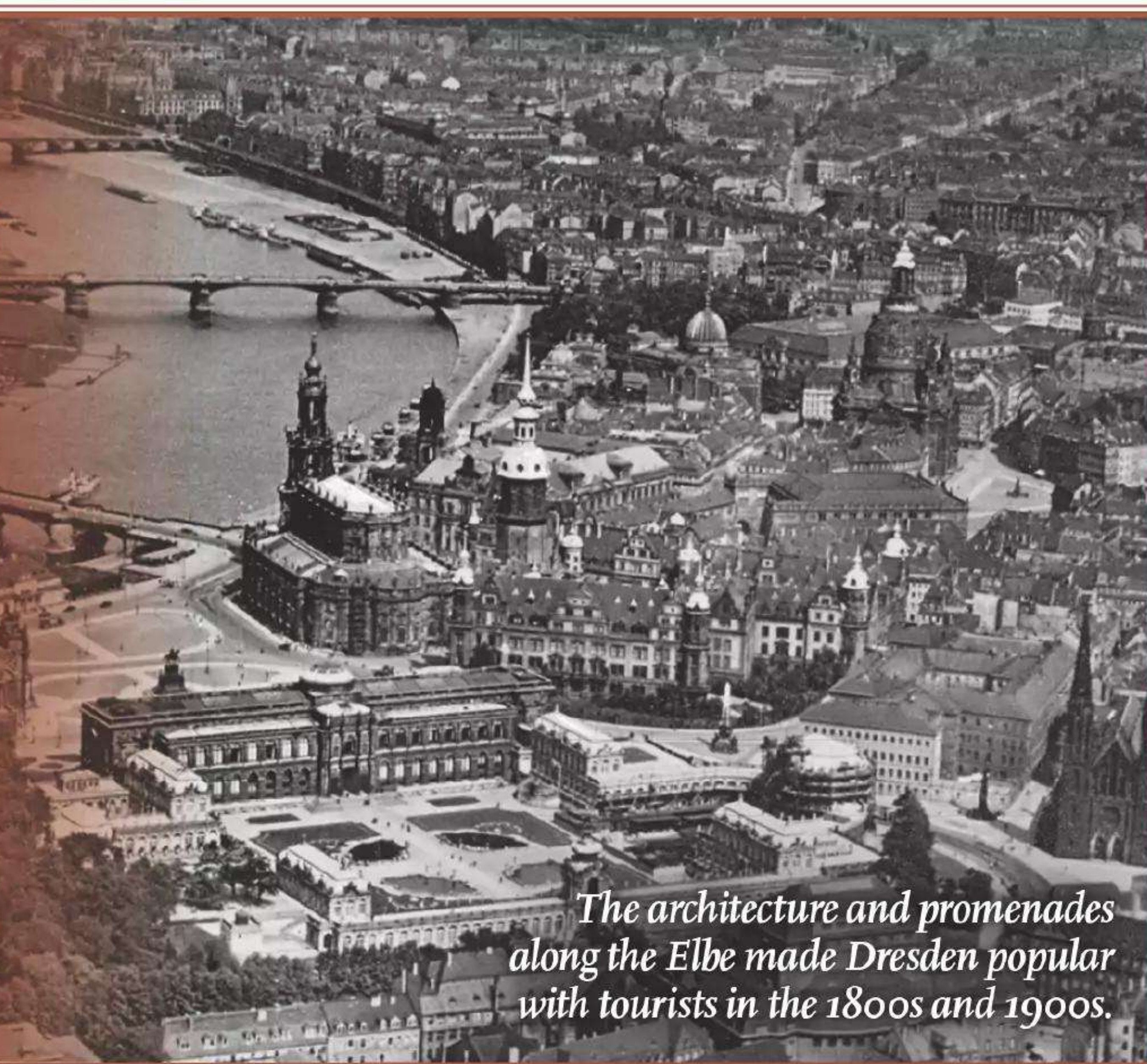
Thousands of magnesium bombs tumbled through the rooftops and ignited a host of small fires. In the space

## The pearl on the Elbe

Dresden's architecture was inspired by Italian models and the city was renowned far and wide.

**T**owards the end of World War II, Dresden remained one of a select number of German cities yet to be bombed. The city had been an architectural gem since the 18th Century when Augustus II, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, created an impressive capital inspired by Renaissance Italy. Beautiful sandstone palaces shot up and in 1734 the Frauenkirche was completed. Its tall dome made the church Dresden's major landmark for the next 200 years, symbolising the city's prosperity.

Augustus III continued to embellish the city, and created grand promenades along the Elbe. Dresden was nicknamed "Florence of the Elbe" and became a favourite destination attracting tourists from all over Europe.



*The architecture and promenades along the Elbe made Dresden popular with tourists in the 1800s and 1900s.*



*A flight engineer checks the  
control panel behind his seat  
next to the pilot in his  
Lancaster bomber.*





## BOMBERS

# Lancaster was RAF's trump card

The Lancaster played a starring role in the British strategic bombing of Germany, boasting a range twice that of the Halifax and maximum bomb load of almost 10 tons.

## Handley Page Halifax four-engine heavy bomber

The Royal Air Force introduced the Halifax into service in November 1940. The plane couldn't load bombs as large and heavy as the Lancaster.

■ Length	.....21.81 m
■ Wingspan	..... 31.74 m
■ Top speed	..... 498 km/h
■ Bomb capacity	..... 5,448 kg
■ Range	..... 2,032 km

**Nose gunner** also directed the aircraft to its bomb targets.

**Cockpit** was divided between the pilot and flight engineer.

**Antenna** for radio communications.

**Nose gunner** possessed two 7.7-mm Browning machine guns.

**Each engine** was a Rolls-Royce Merlin with Rotol wood propellers, providing 1,280 hp.



**Avro Lancaster**

**Bomb load** could contain a single Grand Slam bomb weighing almost 10,000 kg.

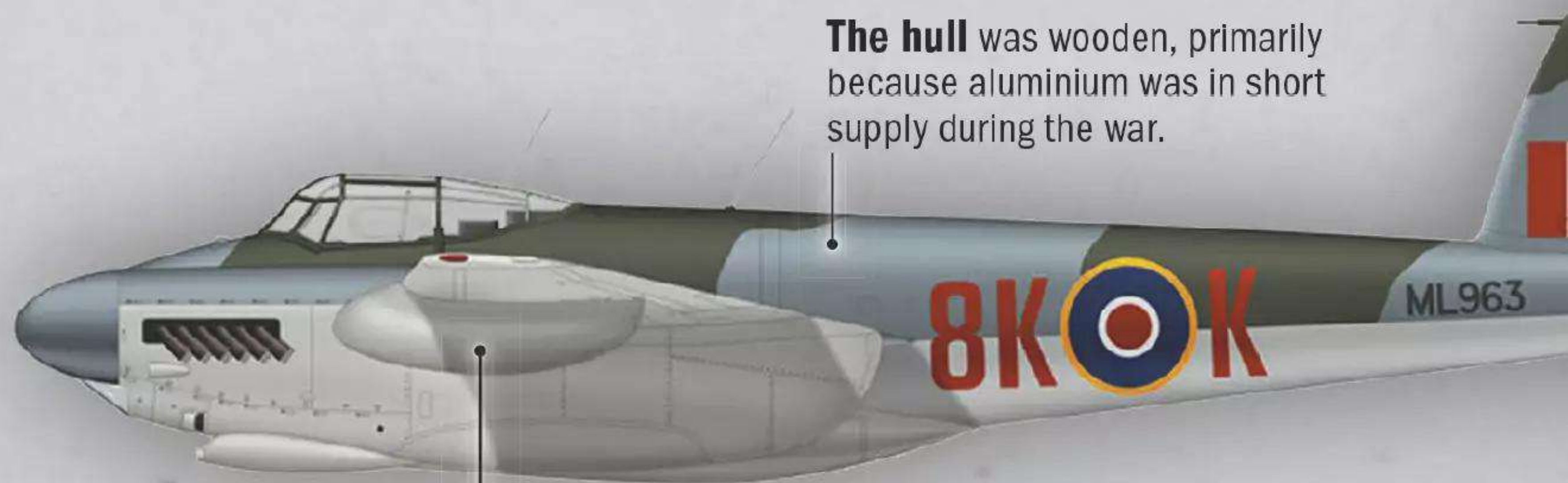
**Aft machine guns** were two or four 7.7-mm Brownings.

## De Havilland Mosquito fighter

The Mosquito's high top speed made it particularly suitable for pinpoint operations and precision bombing deep inside enemy territory.

■ Length	..... 12.64 m
■ Wingspan	..... 16.5 m
■ Top speed	..... 669 km/h
■ Bomb capacity	..... 1,816 kg
■ Range	..... 2,395 km

**The hull** was wooden, primarily because aluminium was in short supply during the war.



**The engines** were twin Rolls-Royce Merlin Mk 23 or Mk 25.

of eight minutes, the British dropped 881 tons of bombs, after which the bombers turned home.

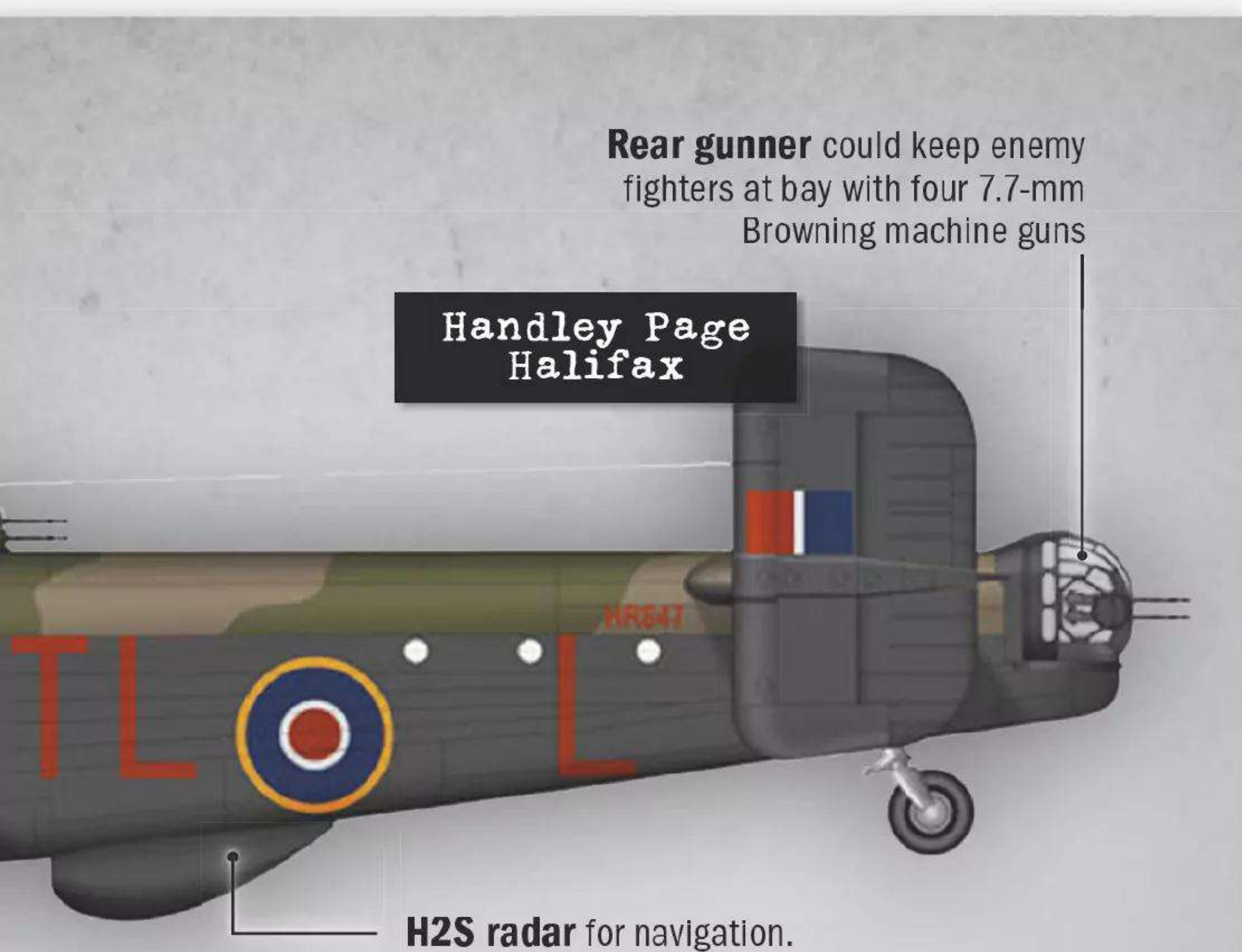
The Dresden fire service had no chance of getting the flames under control. The first explosive bombs had shattered buildings into splinters that were now easy to set alight. The many fires merged as temperatures approached 1,000 degrees centigrade. The super-heated air began to rise as a pillar of fire, sucking the oxygen away. 21-year-old engineering student Berthold Meyer experienced the firestorm at close quarters: "My lungs were heaving. My knees began to turn weak. It was

horrifying. Some individuals, especially the older people, started to hang back. They would sit down apathetically on the street, or on piles of rubble, and just perish from asphyxiation".

### FIRE CONSUMED EVERYTHING

Both trees and people were burned alive as the firestorm enveloped everything in its path. The heat was so intense that buildings and people caught fire without being in direct contact with the flames. The more sensible covered themselves in wet blankets and immediately fled towards the Elbe. Others paused





Rear gunner could keep enemy fighters at bay with four 7.7-mm Browning machine guns

Handley Page  
Halifax

H2S radar for navigation.

## Avro Lancaster four-engine heavy bomber

The Lancaster became operational in February 1942 and was the RAF's most-used heavy bomber in the war, particularly proficient during nightly bombing raids.

■ Length	.....21.08 m
■ Wingspan	..... 31 m
■ Top speed	..... 462 km/h
■ Bomb capacity	..... 9,998 kg
■ Range	.....4,072 km



De Havilland  
Mosquito

*A cargo of large explosive bombs and small firebombs is inspected before the plane's departure.*



to save personal belongings because they thought the bombing was over. But they were terribly mistaken.

The Second World War had felt remote to most of Dresden's inhabitants. A few bombs had been dropped in the surrounding rural areas every now and then, but nothing that caused serious damage or hurt anyone. The war's two fronts were far away, and until now British bombers had not targeted Dresden.

But this picture changed as the war progressed, and Dresden's fate became entwined with the appointment of

Arthur "Bomber" Harris as head of the RAF's Bomber Command in February 1942.

One of Harris's first tasks was to implement a new strategy called "area bombing". So far, the British had attempted precision bombing, but nine times out of ten the bombs missed their targets. It was obvious British aircraft weren't accurate enough, so the argument went that "bombing anything in Germany was better than bombing nothing".

Harris ordered numerous carpet bombings of specified areas – usually urban centres – using incendiary bombs.

In addition, Harris instructed his bombers to attack in two separate waves, half an hour apart. Experience showed that it increased the chance of creating a devastating firestorm. This had proved true for Hamburg's inhabitants when a twin British attack on 27th July, 1943, sparked a fierce inferno that killed over 40,000 people. After this personal success, Harris made the double attack an ongoing strategy.



*A pilot's equipment included gloves and a leather helmet with built-in headphones.*

## DRESDEN WAS A PRIME TARGET

By summer 1944, the Germans were in retreat on all fronts. Allied high command discussed the possibility of forcing Hitler to surrender by launching a giant bombing raid on Berlin, but on 16th December, 1944, the Germans launched a counter-offensive in the Ardennes. 400,000 soldiers accompanied by 1,200 tanks punched a hole through the Allied lines in Belgium.

The Allies were left shaken, and the idea to target only Berlin was dropped. Instead, improved Lancaster aircraft would bomb the morale out of Berlin and other German cities. Chief of the Air Staff Sir Charles Portal imagined that "immense devastation could be produced if the entire attack was concentrated on a single big town other than Berlin and the effect would be especially great if the town was one hitherto undamaged".

This made Dresden a prime target. It was the seventh largest city in Germany and was largely unscathed. Crucially, however, it was a transport hub in the defence of the Eastern Front.

Every day, troops travelled through Dresden on their way to the battlefields, while thousands of refugees streamed in from the opposite direction. The Red Army was now only 113 kilometres (70 miles) from the city, and the Allies wanted to aid their advance. Intelligence suggested that the Germans could mobilise around 500,000 troops by 15th February. Many would travel through Dresden, so a massive attack on the city's rail network would delay their deployment considerably.

Bomber Command wasn't satisfied with simply bombing railway installations around Dresden, however. If they bombed the city centre, they could destroy communication hubs and – most importantly – create chaos among civilians. >>



# Diversions fooled the Germans

The attack on Dresden involved almost 1,500 aircraft. Half bombed the city itself, while the rest provided diversions in the forms of small-scale bombing and electronic warfare, so even the brightest German radar operators couldn't predict where the main strike would occur.

**PRELUDE: 19.13**



## British attack groups

While the main force of bombers take off from Reading in Berkshire, Mosquito aircraft make fake attacks on Magdeburg. Other smaller groups attack Nuremberg, while 368 Halifax bombers shell an oil refinery at Leipzig. Lancaster aircraft drop strips of aluminium foil that – to German radar – appear to be a huge bomb attack, confusing their defences.

10 Halifax aircraft also fly ahead of the main force, equipped with Mandrel jammers to disrupt German radar signals and hide the bomber formations.

**DRESDEN: 22.03**

## 2 Flight marks the city stadium

Mosquito marker planes dive down towards the city's football stadium and drop target indicators. The bombs explode a few hundred metres above ground cascading red hot flame over the stadium. The Germans dub them "Christmas trees" because of the way the colour spreads across the sky.

## 3 First Lancaster ignites grandstands

Dresden's stadium is now the attack target, located close to the city's main railway bridge. The first Lancaster aircraft sets fire to the stadium's wooden stands so the other planes have a flaming point of sight.

## 4 Bombs are dropped

The main attack force approaches from the northwest. They're instructed to bomb along each carefully marked route from the stadium to the centre of Dresden. Each aircraft drops a pair of explosive "blockbuster" bombs alongside the bulk of their load: 1,800 kg of magnesium and petroleum incendiary bombs.



A Lancaster aircraft drops its lethal load of high-explosive and incendiary bombs.

## 5 British launch second attack wave

Three hours later at 01.21, a second wave repeats the procedure. 551 Lancaster bombers – twice as many as the first wave – deliver their final blow. In total, the British drop 3,527 tons of bombs, including 404,400 firebombs.

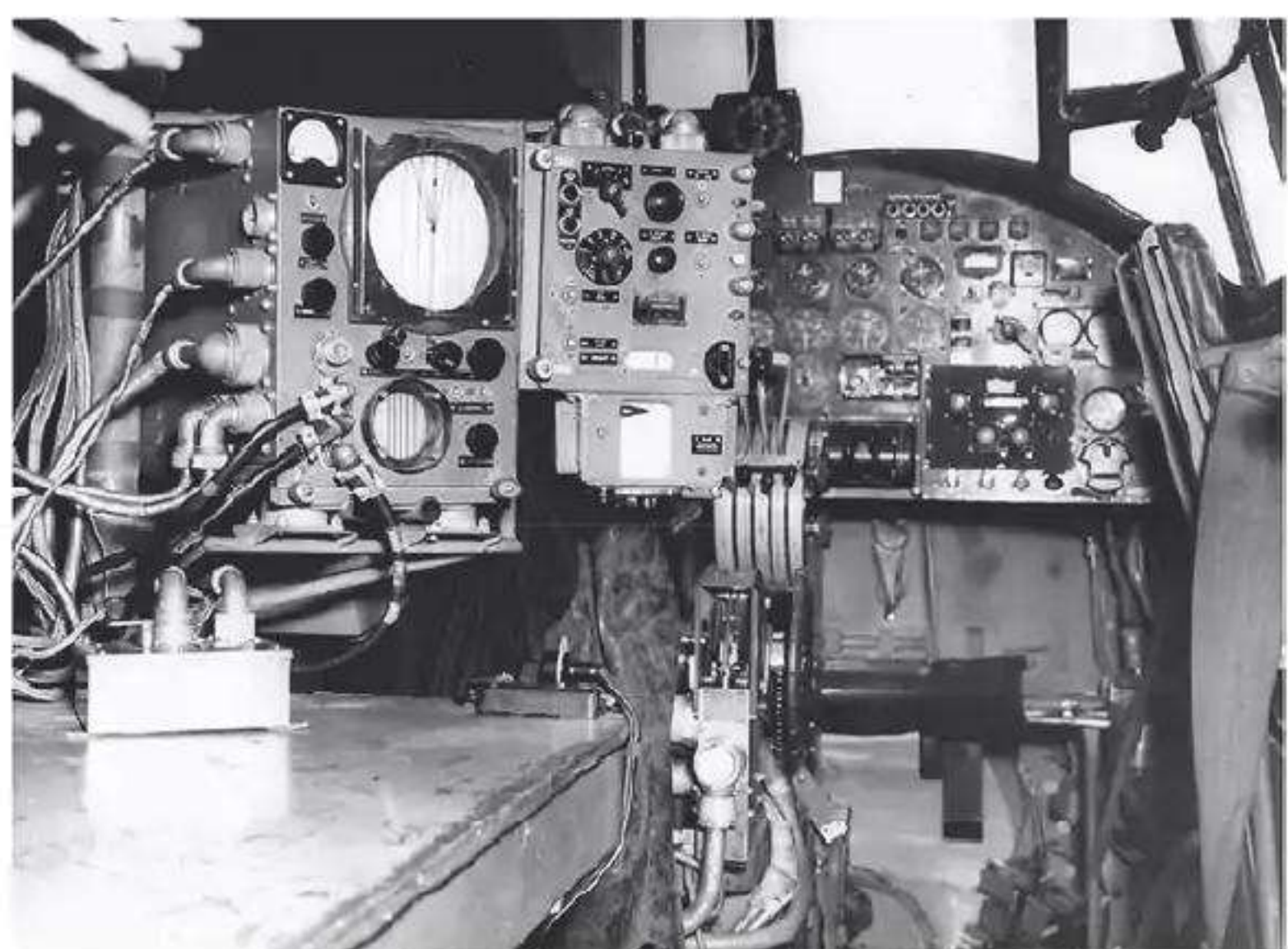


The huge bombs from the Lancaster aircraft were the main force of the British bombing of Dresden.



## 1 Pathfinders locate the city and light it up

Lancaster Pathfinders locate Dresden by means of H2S radar and drop magnesium parachute flares. These descend slowly to the ground, illuminating the city for the other planes. Shortly after, the Master Bomber arrives.



Lancaster bombers were equipped with the advanced H2S radar system for navigation.



## MASTER BOMBER

■ An experienced pilot with the title *Master Bomber* led bombing raids. Throughout the attack he would circle the target in his Mosquito aircraft, directing his colleagues to bomb at different angles, heights and times, to reduce the risk of bombing crews hitting each other.

FACTS



The Germans' willingness to continue fighting would be broken, thus paving the road to victory.

The Allies hoped to paralyse the entire region, and Harris wrote in a letter to Winston Churchill that he would "knock Germany finally flat".

The Prime Minister approved the operation in late January 1945. Berlin, Dresden and Chemnitz were to be attacked as soon as possible, and on 13th February, weather conditions were finally suitable for a raid on Dresden.

## SECOND WAVE COMPLETED FIRESTORM

The inferno rose like a chimney over Dresden. The column of hot air was visible 160 kilometres away as the second wave of bombers swarmed into the city at 01.07. Clouds of smoke rising kilometres into the air disrupted their vision, while the firestorm's fierce heat could be felt in the cockpit at 3 kilometres.

On the ground, it suddenly became apparent more bombs were on their way: "Suddenly we heard the distant hooting of sirens from the south-eastern suburbs: air alert!" Christian Just recalled. "I still remember how some people cried out, 'No! Not again.' And then a scenario began which engraved the inferno of Dresden on my mind: engine noise, the rush of the bombs, the deafening roar of the bombs, a moment of silence and then the same again, and again and again!"

It was like a slaughterhouse. The electricity was out, so the sirens hadn't worked in the centre, meaning the second wave arrived without warning. Many died attempting to escape through the streets, others while they were saving their belongings. Another inhabitant, Gerhard Erich Bähr, had just reached his cellar when the bombs fell again:

"The walls tottered, square stones crashed down on us, the air was full of dust, we couldn't breathe... My legs were buried. On them lay a square of sandstone, a suitcase and a thick grey sack which felt wet... I tried to pull away to get out. I recognised this wasn't a sack, but a man without a head".

The second wave's additional 1,175 tons of incendiary bombs further intensified the firestorm. Burning wooden beams flew through the air as sparks and flames rained down everywhere. They constantly threatened to blind or mutilate the fugitives struggling to escape from the old town's maze of streets. The heat was so violent that the asphalt roads and pavements melted. Some lost their shoes in a thick porridge of tar, carrying on until their feet were too badly burned. Survival depended on a person's footwear, because those with tight-fitting, sturdy boots had the best chance of escaping the inferno before being devoured by the fierce flames.

## LACK OF AIR DEFENCE PROVED COSTLY

When the Allies chose to bomb Dresden, they never imagined the attack would be one of history's most violent. Several factors contributed to the scale of destruction. First and foremost was that the city's air defences were virtually non-existent. Dresden's anti- >>>





*In March 1946, women form a chain as they participate in the reconstruction of their bombed city. Despite the violent terror bombings, the British failed to break the city's morale.*



*A poster invited all citizens to lend a hand in the reconstruction of Dresden.*

aircraft guns had been packed up and shipped to the industrial Ruhr district a few weeks earlier. Compounding this was a shortage of fuel, which meant Germans had to keep their fighters on the ground for as long as possible until they were completely sure where the British were bombing. Oil supplies were so tight that Luftwaffe planes were towed on to the runways by horses and oxen. British bombers were

therefore able to fly undisturbed over Dresden.

In addition, the city's bunkers and shelters were inadequate and poorly constructed. Most had no fireproof walls or doors, nor did they have filters to allow oxygen to circulate while keeping toxic gases out.

### PRISONERS CLEARED BASEMENTS OF CORPSES

The following day a dirty, grey smoke hung over Dresden. It was so thick many didn't realise it was morning. Fires continued to rage everywhere as survivors and rescue teams picked their way among the ruins. In many places it was still too hot to move, and survivors were met with a grotesque and

horrific sight. Margaret Freyer looked desperately for her fiancé among the dead: "From some of the debris poked arms, heads, legs, shattered skulls. The static water tanks were filled up to the top with dead human beings... Most people looked as if they had been inflated, with large yellow and brown stains on their bodies: people whose clothes were still glowing".

And still the bombers came. At 12.17, 316 American B17 bombers buzzed over the burning ruins. They'd been redirected to Dresden because the cloud was too low over their primary target. Another 782 tons of bombs rained down on the city.

The largest fires weren't extinguished until the following day, and over the following weeks 2,000 Wehrmacht troops and 1,000 prisoners of war cleared the blocked streets and emptied the shelters and cellars of bodies poisoned by carbon monoxide. It was gruesome work. An area of Dresden around 21 km<sup>2</sup> had been left in ruins. 12,000 buildings and 200 factories were destroyed, and around 25,000 people died, with twice as many left homeless. On 21st February, Dresden's old square was closed and transformed into a giant crematorium where the bodies were burned.

Despite the destruction and huge loss of life, the raid failed to prevent troops being transported to the Eastern Front or break German morale. Two weeks after the attack, the number of trains travelling through Dresden was back to normal levels, and the city's surviving residents remained loyal to Hitler to the bitter end.



# Allies tried bombing German population to its knees

It was not only Dresden that suffered from Allied strategic bombing. Half of the war's 10 most devastating bombing raids were inflicted on German cities. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed or left homeless when their cities were reduced to burning rubble.

## A week-long firestorm left Hamburg in ashes

Hamburg was bombed throughout the war, but in July 1943 Operation Gomorrah left the city in ruins.

Number of deaths:

**42,600**

● HAMBURG

## Berlin was bombed frequently

From 1940-45 the German capital was subject to no fewer than 363 British, American and Soviet bombing raids.

Number of deaths (estimated):

**35,000**

● BERLIN

● DRESDEN

## Two days of bombing left Dresden devastated

British and US aircraft dropped 4,354 tons of explosive and incendiary bombs on the city over two days in February 1945.

Number of deaths:

**25,000**

## Pforzheim paid for its precision engineering

The RAF bombed Pforzheim to prevent the city's watchmakers from producing precision instruments for German war use.

Number of deaths:

**21,200**

● PFORZHEIM

● DARMSTADT

## Darmstadt was terror bombed

The university town had no industrial targets, but was nevertheless subjected to a devastating raid in September 1944.

Number of deaths:

**12,300**

Austria

*Dresden was only one of several German cities devastated by fierce Allied bombing.*



*School boys and older  
men defended Breslau  
armed with so-called  
panzerfaust.*

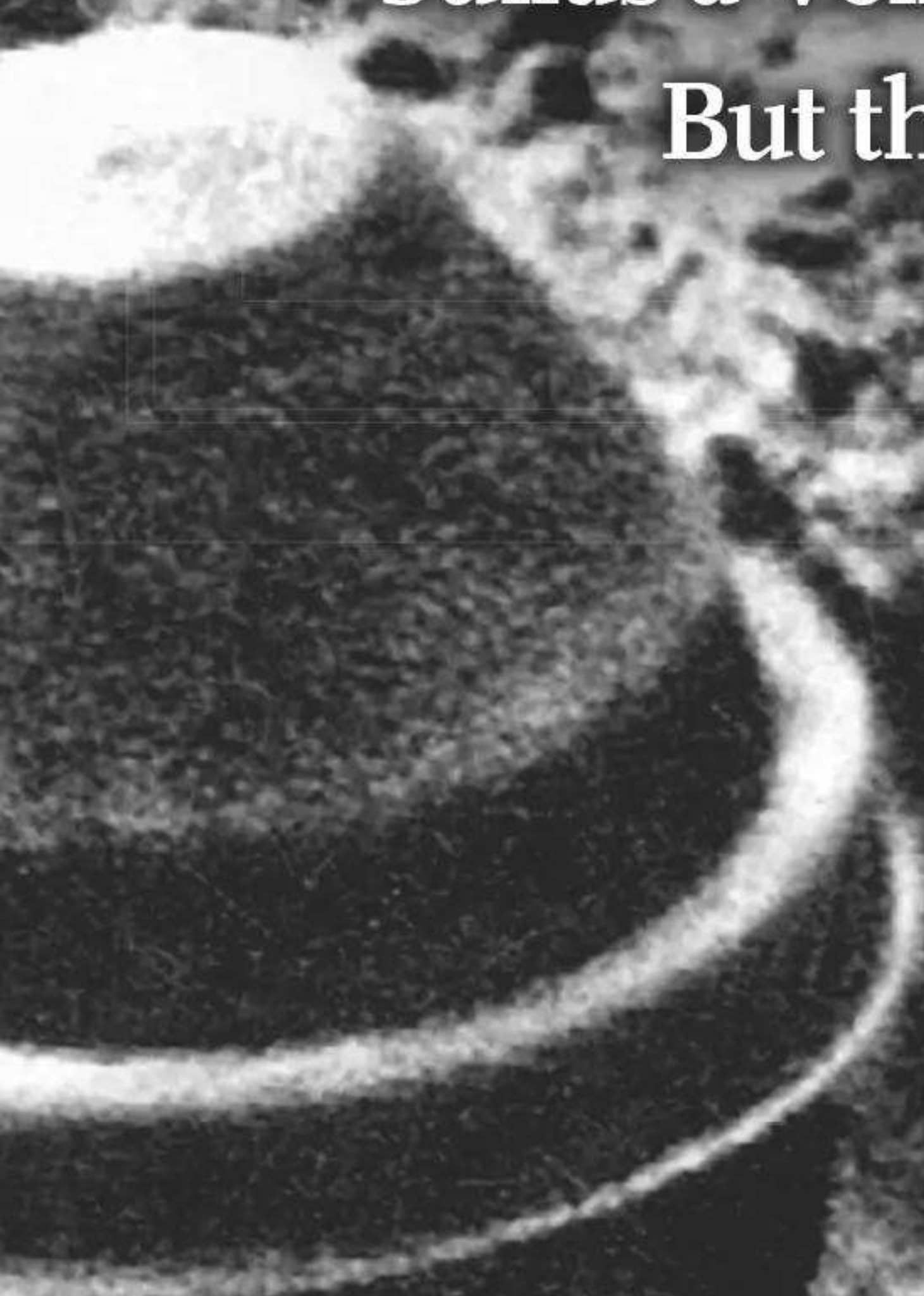
1945

6<sup>TH</sup> MAY



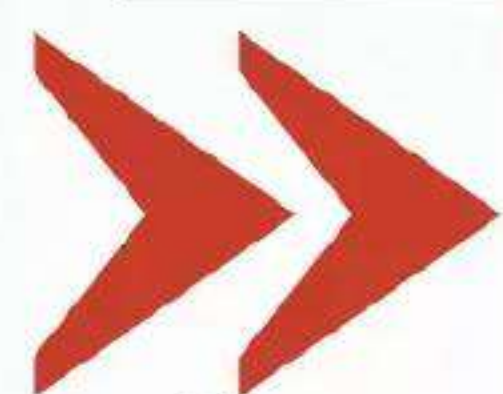
# DOOMED CITY DEFIES STALIN

To slow the Red Army's relentless advance, Hitler designates a number of cities as "fortresses" that must be held at all cost. They include the historic city of Breslau, where the local Nazi commander builds a Volkssturm ("People's Storm") of old men and young boys. But this rag-tag bunch faces an almost impossible task.





## THE STAGE IS SET



Nazi Germany is losing the war. The Eastern Front is close to collapse, and Soviet forces advance inexorably westward. But part of the Red Army becomes embroiled in a lengthy siege of Breslau. Here the invasion army battle soldiers and civilians who have transformed the city into a solid fortress over several months.



**S**OVIET TROOPS HAD FINALLY OCCUPIED Breslau. Drunk soldiers prowled the streets while inhabitants hid in fear. But not even the church was sacred. The door was kicked in, and the few men dragged outside and beaten. Inside, the crypt was packed with women who would be raped. Nobody was spared – if they resisted, they were killed.

It was 6th May, 1945, and the war was finally over – along with Breslau. The historic city's nightmare had begun almost a year earlier in August 1944. At the time, Germany was on the defensive everywhere along the Eastern Front. In an attempt to prevent Soviet troops from overwhelming the country, the Führer had designated several towns in East Prussia, Poland and Silesia to be "fortress cities" that must above all else prevail. All able-bodied men in Breslau were deployed to prepare for the siege everyone knew was coming.

#### THEATRE DIRECTOR WAS HARD AT WORK BEGINNING OF AUGUST, 1944

The Red Army stood at Warsaw, only 400 kilometres away. Sweat ran down Hugo Hartung's forehead. Usually he would be directing performances at Breslau's theatre and was unfamiliar

with this kind of physical labour. The same applied to his theatre colleagues who toiled side-by-side with him.

Hartung was working on Operation Bartold, constructing deep ditches six metres wide and four metres deep, designed to stop advancing tanks. As the sun climbed higher in the sky, the spades felt increasingly heavy as they dug with difficulty

*The Soviets carried on shelling Breslau even after they'd entered the city.*

#### Breslau

was founded before AD 900 and has since been part of Bohemia, Poland, Silesia, Hungary, Austria, Prussia and Germany. Today it's known by its Polish name, Wrocław.

into the fertile Silesian soil. More men collapsed from exhaustion – and probably for no reason. "This will not stop one Soviet tank", Hartung heard an officer say. "If one really falls into this network of ditches, the next one will already be driving across it".

#### HITLER'S HENCHMAN KNEW TRUTH FRIDAY, 12TH JANUARY, 1945

The Red Army began its major offensive. 2.2 million Soviet soldiers stood ready.

Breslau's local commander was Gauleiter Karl Hanke, who heard the news of the Russian offensive on the radio in his office in Hatzfeld Palace. It would only be a matter of days before the enemy reached the city. Hanke sat deep in thought, until his secretary's voice brought him back to reality.

"Amazing really that they're risking everything, in their situation", the young woman chirped.

Hanke frowned. "Who?"

"The Russians, of course, who else?"

"But where's the risk?"

"But Karl, they're at the end of their strength", she said patiently. "They only have a couple of American tanks which have got through our blockade up there in Murmansk".

Hanke was among Hitler's most loyal supporters, and had worked in the propaganda ministry. He knew the truth.

"Dear child", the Gauleiter answered, "that's the wisdom of the propaganda office. Do not rely on it too much".

#### THE HANGMAN STIRRED HIS RAG-TAG ARMY MID-JANUARY, 1945

Soviet forces had advanced across the German front and were now less than 10 kilometres from Breslau.

"Harm the enemy wherever possible!" shouted Gauleiter Hanke enthusiastically to a crowd of schoolboys and grey-haired men. All able-bodied adult males had long since been sent to the front. Hanke had been left with just a few thousand trained soldiers to defend the city; the rest of his army was rag-tag, poorly armed civilians from the so-called Volkssturm ("People's Storm"), a newly established national militia comprising any men between 16 and 60 years of age. They totalled 50,000, about to face a much larger Soviet force armed with heavy weapons.

"Meine Herren [Gentlemen], there is no shame in dying for Greater Germany", Hanke continued

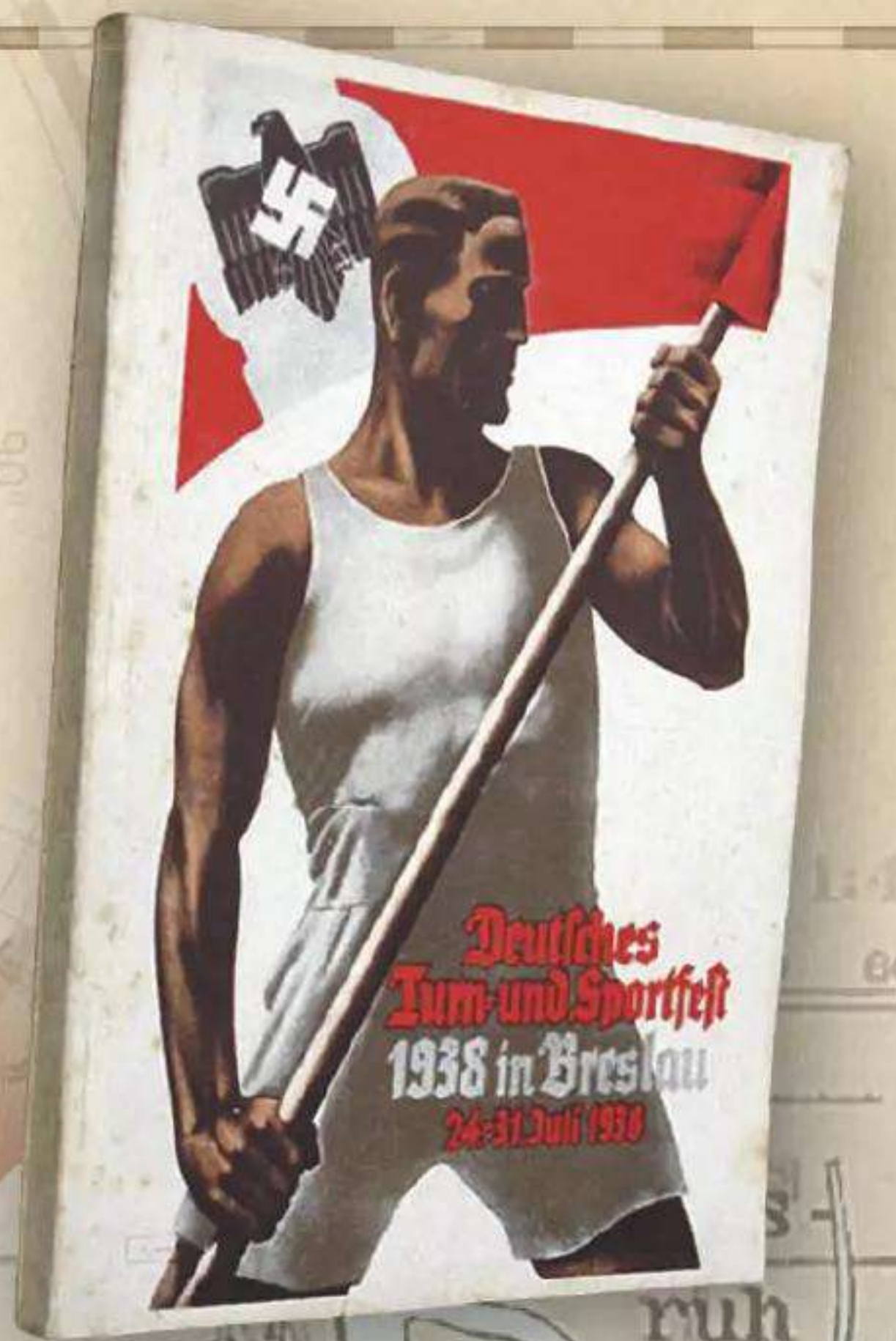




# "Fortress Breslau" held out for 82 days

Soviet forces encircled Breslau on 15th February, but the city was prepared and kept the Red Army at bay for almost three months.

Before the war, Breslau hosted a gymnastics festival in 1938.



 The Red Army

## Karl Hanke's mansion

The city's Gauleiter had a **well-fortified mansion** in the city centre, but he eventually chose to flee by plane.

## Runway

Nazi leader Karl Hanke had **cleared an area** for a new runway by blowing up a number of properties.

## St. Mauritius Church

In April, St Mauritius was **hit by a bomb**. The church was almost completely destroyed.

Russian troops relentlessly shelled the centre of Breslau during the siege.

## HITLER SACRIFICED CITIES

FACTS

- Several cities in Europe were designated so-called "fortresses" by the Nazi leadership – cities that had to be held at all costs.
- The main fortress cities in Eastern Europe were Warsaw, Kolberg, Posen, Küstrin, Königsberg and Breslau.
- Responsibility for their defence lay with local commanders. Some still chose to surrender – for example, Otto Lasch in Königsberg. As a result, he was sentenced to death in absentia.



energetically. Throughout his four years as a gauleiter in Breslau, he had ordered over 1,000 executions and was referred to as the Hangman of Breslau. "Attack!" Hanke roared suddenly. The assembled men raised their right arm and reflexively shouted, "Sieg Heil!"

### **WOMEN AND CHILDREN DIED FROM THE COLD**

**SATURDAY, 20TH JANUARY, 1945**

For months Hanke prevented civilians from fleeing, but now 600,000 women and children needed to leave the city – now. The city train station saw thousands of people attempting to board the same train. Panic gripped those desperately waiting, and over 100 were trampled to death.

The vast majority had to abandon the idea of getting on board. Instead, they slipped and skidded west along icy roads in endless columns. Among them was housewife Frau

Hanisch, who carried her four-month-old daughter Gabi in her arms. Along the road, women lay exhausted in the snow as the cold literally sucked the life out of them.

Gabi cried with hunger, but refused to breastfeed. She'd packed a bottle of milk, but it had

*The Volkssturm were forced to fight the Russians with simple weapons.*

**90,000**

Russian soldiers participated in the siege of Breslau. The majority came from the Soviet 6th Army under the command of General Vladimir Gluzdovskii.

frozen. Every time Frau Hanisch passed a house with lights on she knocked hoping to be allowed to warm the bottle. Only at dawn was she able to find a house willing to let her in – rushing inside, she unwrapped the baby from her blankets, but Gabi was completely silent. "She's dead", said a woman standing next to her. Around 90,000 people died trying to escape from Breslau.

### **THE ENEMY ATTACKED THE AIRFIELD THURSDAY, 15TH FEBRUARY, 1945**

Breslau was completely encircled. All supplies would now have to be airlifted in.

Theatre director Hugo Hartung was deployed to defend the airfield at Schöngarten on the city outskirts. He was about to go to bed when a voice cut through the night.

"The Russians are at the airfield fence!"

The men tumbled out. A tracer flashed on to the runway. Several buildings were already alight, and the night sky glowed ominously. Hartung could make out several farms in the area that were also burning. From the stables came the panicked bellows of cows. As bullets whistled around his ears, Hartung fled into an officer's house.

Along the way he was forced to zigzag between the dead and wounded. "Come to us! Come to us!" roared from a loudspeaker set up by the Soviets. Then music started: first 'Internationale', then 'Lili-Marleen' and the 'Viennese Waltz'.

Hartung and a few of his colleagues sought refuge in a basement. A few hours later, a messenger arrived with the news they would have to abandon the airfield to the enemy.

### **THE GERMANS WERE OUTGUNNED SUNDAY, 18TH FEBRUARY, 1945**

The Soviet soldiers fought their way through Breslau's suburbs, capturing street after street.

Paul Peikert was not an easy man to subjugate. He'd been Catholic priest at St Mauritius Church for 13 years. His





opposition to the Nazis was well-known, and not even interrogation by the Gestapo had shaken the 60-year-old priest.

He was deeply affected, however, now that he had to bury the first man from his parish. The dead SS officer was Erich Seega, aged 24. The enemy attacked with 12 tanks; the Germans had no heavy artillery. Seega was the only body out of around 150 fallen Germans that was salvaged; the rest were left behind.

The coffin had barely been lowered into the grave before a high blast from Soviet bombs broke the sombre silence. Peikert and the funeral entourage fled the church. Bombs fell throughout the rest of the day and into the frosty night.

### OFFICERS WERE PRESSURED FROM ABOVE THURSDAY, 1ST MARCH, 1945

The city of Posen surrendered after a month of fierce fighting. General Hermann Niehoff was dispatched to Breslau with a sharp reminder.

General Niehoff listened attentively to the voice on the phone. General Colonel Ferdinand Schörner expressed himself directly as always. Schörner – nicknamed “Bloody Ferdinand” – was one of Germany’s most decorated generals and was now in command of forces in Czechoslovakia and the Oder region, where Breslau was located. With pressure being exerted by the Red Army, Schörner could not afford any misunderstanding.

“You must hold the fortress to the last man and to the last round”, he said. “If you fail in your task not only will you face the death sentence, but your family too will also bear responsibility”.

Niehoff knew the threat was real. Since February 1945, a law allowed family members of officers who Hitler perceived as cowards to be executed. When Niehoff hung up, he hastily scribbled a few words to his wife and children on a piece of paper. “I know what is expected of me. Live well!” He wrote.

### THE EXODUS WAS COMING SUNDAY, 11TH MARCH, 1945

Heroes Memorial Day was marked in Karl Hanke’s mansion. About 150 exhausted and dirty soldiers, Volkssturm and Hitler Youth members made their way into the ballroom. After some



**KARL HANKE**

NAME

TITLE

GAULEITER

### Hangman vanished without trace

Karl Hanke joined the Nazi Party in 1928 and worked his way up through the party from a relatively low level.

As commander in Breslau, Hanke ordered the deaths of so many people he was nicknamed “Hangman of Breslau”.

Hanke’s fate after the war is uncertain, but it’s generally accepted he was executed by Czech partisans in May or June 1945.



- Elected to the Reichstag in 1932.
- Replaced Himmler as Reichsführer-SS.

1903-?

brief remarks from Hanke, it was General Niehoff’s turn. Breslau’s inhabitants must “stick it out... even if in the end the city was nothing but a field of ruins”. Breslau would – of course – soon be relieved by German auxiliary troops, Niehoff said, although he couldn’t say exactly when. “It could be 10 to 14 days, but it could be even longer”. Until then, he continued, “we pledge to the Führer that we in Breslau, that trusted old barrier in the East, will prove ourselves as fanatical warriors”.

Hanke then handed medals out. Among the recipients was a 17-year-old boy dubbed “Panzer Karl”. He would run solo through the city with a panzerfaust under each arm, ready to attack Soviet tanks.

### NEW AIRFIELD BUILT INSIDE CITY MID-MARCH, 1945

The Soviets gained control over the airfield at Gandau – Breslau was close to being cut off from receiving supplies.

“Fire commanders, do your duty”. Priest Paul Peikert read the posters hanging in the streets with disgust. ➤➤

More than 80 percent of the buildings in Breslau were destroyed by the Soviet bombardment.



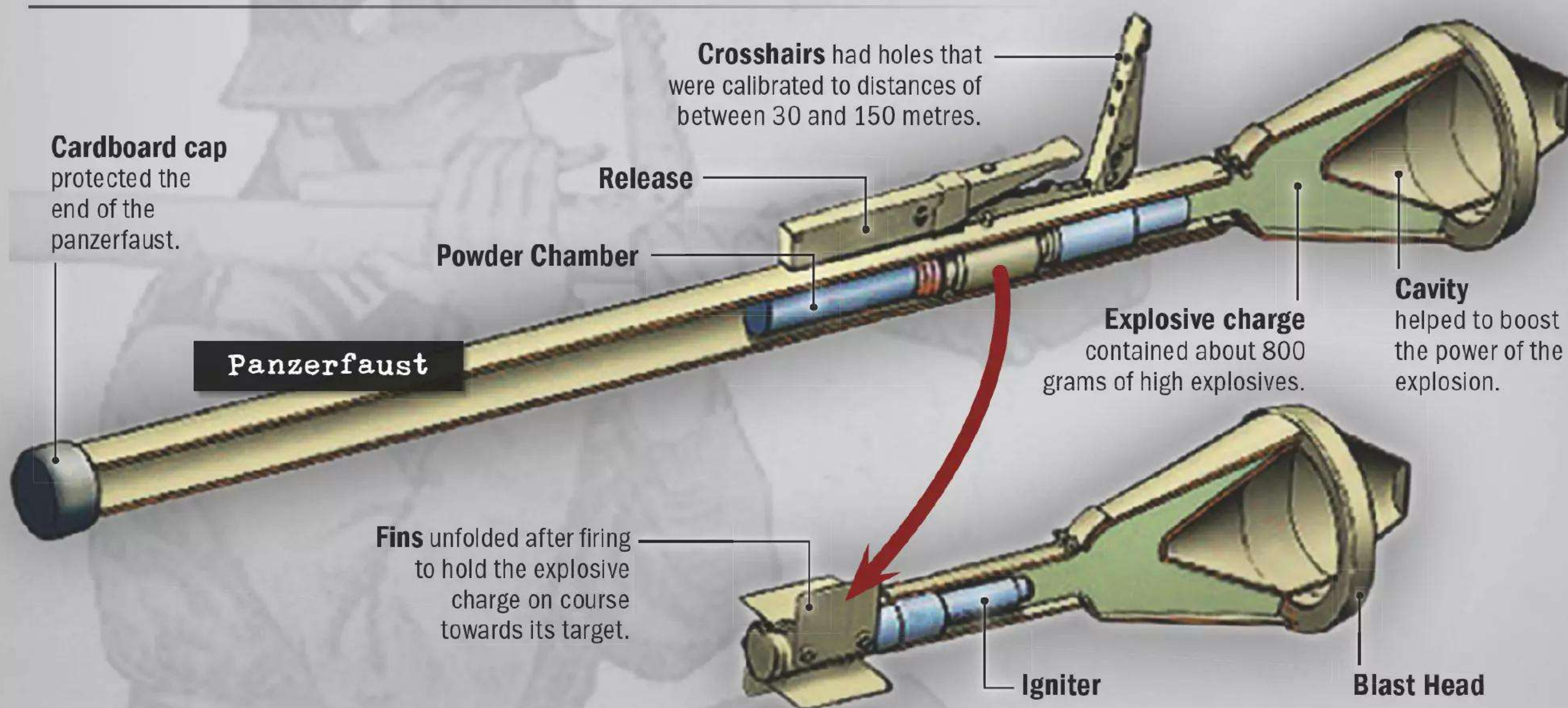
## WEAPONS

# Handheld weapon could take out tanks

The panzerfaust was effective at close range and simple enough for a civilian to use. With a lucky shot, a single panzerfaust could disable a tank.



Soldiers were warned to avoid the "fire jet" from the rear of the weapon.



The paramilitary groups had nothing to do with fire-fighting; on the contrary, Karl Hanke had ordered them to level the neighbourhood around the Lutheran church near the city centre in order to build an airstrip to replace the airfield at Gandau, due to fall into Soviet hands at any moment.

Residents had been thrown on the street, along with the contents of their homes. Clothing, books, cookware and knickknacks alike were scattered everywhere. Armed men kept the inhabitants at a safe distance while the fire units poured tar over the piles and set them alight. After that, the buildings were burned. Not even the Lutherkirche, a neo-Gothic church whose spire was Breslau's highest before the war, was spared.

The plan was to create a runway 1,000 metres long near the city centre. Naturally, the Soviet besiegers attempted to prevent its completion. Shells rained down on the building site almost around the clock, and over 13,000 people from the forced labour teams were killed before the runway was completed.

## ATTACK DISRUPTED WORSHIP 1ST APRIL, 1945

Soviet forces launched an offensive.

In the church shelter under Klosterstrasse, Peikert had barely finished his opening prayer when a rumbling announced the beginning of a new bombing raid. Unrest spread throughout

the shelter, where around 300 of Peikert's parishioners had gathered for Easter Sunday.

A deafening explosion set the walls shaking and candlesticks fell from the altar. Several worshippers jumped up in terror, convinced their final hour had come. Suddenly, the heavy door to the room rattled. "Fire! Out! The street's on fire!" Old men, women and children stampeded towards the stairs leading up to the street. They were of one mind: get away.

They weren't greeted by fresh air, however; instead it was "just one huge sea of flames". The heat hit them like a wall, they breathed fire and sparks. Some people's clothes caught fire – screaming, they futilely tried to roll on the pavement. Meanwhile, more shells howled through the air. People were literally thrown "like paper tossed in an autumn storm". The survivors fled in terror past blackened walls, charred bodies and burned-out vehicles.

## BOMBS SET THE CITY ON FIRE TUESDAY, 3RD APRIL, 1945

After weeks of intensive bombardments as much as 80 percent of buildings were in ruins.

St Mauritius Church was burning. The fire in the tower was burning from both top and bottom – like a blast furnace, Peikert noted as he hastily packed a bag and left his burning church.

Long tongues of hungry flames reached through the shattered windows, taking hold of anything flammable: flooring, curtains,

**Almost every**  
Breslau German  
inhabitant left the city  
after the war, voluntarily  
or involuntarily. Today,  
only a small group of  
ethnic Germans remain  
in the now-Polish city.



furniture, bedding and wallpaper. Through the burning streets Peikert ran from one shelter to another. The heat burned his lungs and stung his eyes. His throat was dry. He feared being turned into a human torch at any moment.

When the bombing subsided, dead were left everywhere. So many had fallen that the city had long run out of coffins; instead, bodies were wrapped in paper until they could be buried. Like “large white parcels”, Hartung thought. For some it would be the second time they were buried. The bombing of the previous day had blown graves open, leaving the dead lying on the ground. In gardens that hadn’t been converted to cemeteries, the heat from the fires had caused tulips and hyacinths to bloom ahead of time.

### **HITLER YOUTH CELEBRATED IN SECRET FRIDAY, 20TH APRIL, 1945**

**Adolf Hitler’s birthday. In the past, the event was celebrated across the country, but in 1945 there was little revelry.**

In 14-year-old Horst Gleiss’s cellar, his fellow Hitler Youth soldiers partied regardless of the situation. The table was covered in gingerbread, raspberry juice, schnapps, red wine and cigarettes. A group of girls had arrived, and throughout the evening they danced and sang. As the hours passed, however, their forced bonhomie turned to gloom. “Est geht alles vorüber” – it’s all over – they sang.

The feeling of desperation was even more marked among the adult soldiers. They knew the battle was lost, and were terrified for the day they’d have to surrender. They formed packs and rampaged through the city searching for booze. If they found a bottle, the day was saved. And despite being obliged to protect the city’s inhabitants, they often raped women.

### **THE WOUNDED RECEIVED NO AID LATE APRIL, 1945**

**The Red Army had virtually captured Berlin. Hitler committed suicide. “Fortress Breslau” still held firm.**

The flame of the candles cast a flickering glow on the Hochbunker’s grey concrete walls. Occasionally there was groaning or crying, but otherwise silence reigned in the stuffy



*Ruined buildings were particularly suitable as hiding places for snipers.*

*Some people got out of the city in time with the few possessions they could carry.*



room in the bunker facility that had been converted into a field hospital. Wounded and dying men lay everywhere. Bloody sheets were strewn on the floor and the stench was unbearable. Patients were in bunk beds, the top bunk so near the ceiling that their faces almost touched the concrete.

There were virtually no care staff left, so most wounded were left to fend for themselves or die alone.

### **PRIESTS CALLED FOR CAPITULATION FRIDAY, 4TH MAY, 1945**

**Karl Dönitz negotiated peace with the Allies.**

Four of Breslau’s priests had managed to gain an audience with General Hermann Niehoff, the military commander.

“Under these circumstances, can you answer to God for continuing the defence of the city?” One of the priests asked.

Aided by his colleagues, the priest relayed the anguish and suffering of his parishioners’ daily lives. Niehoff was silent, his head bowed. Finally, he looked up: “Your concerns are my concerns. Now tell me what I should do”.

“Surrender”, the priests replied as one.

“You will hear from me shortly”.

Niehoff – without consulting Gauleiter Hanke – then sent two officers armed with a white flag to Soviet

*The heavy Russian guns were specifically trained on the rapidly built runway in the city centre.*







Some 30,000 German soldiers and civilians perished in the defence of the "fortress".

After the war Breslau lost its old German name. The city became Polish, and is now known as Wrocław.

lines. When Hanke heard the news, he ran immediately to Niehoff's office to get an explanation: "General! I've just learned that you want to surrender!" He stormed.

"You heard correctly, Gauleiter, I am preparing to surrender", Niehoff answered.

"Then I must have you arrested, general!"

"If anyone is doing the arresting, Gauleiter, then it's probably me", Niehoff said drily.

An awkward silence filled the room as Hanke fumbled for a response. "Forgive my threat. It was not meant as such. But what should I do?"

Niehoff suggested suicide, but Hanke refused. "I'm still so young. I must live. If I have to wander around the world like a tramp..." The voice – once full of fire – had become timid. "General, help me!"

### THE LAST FLIGHT LEFT TOWN SUNDAY, 6TH MAY, 1945

Nazi Germany was about to go under. At 05.30, a group of men brought a small plane to the airstrip for Karl Hanke.

Gauleiter Hanke boarded the city's last working aircraft, Niehoff's private Fieseler Storch. This would be the only time the city's new runway would actually be used. Effortlessly, the small plane took to the skies and evaded Soviet anti-aircraft fire. Nervously, Hanke gazed out of the window and loosened the tight uniform that had previously belonged to a SS private.

Hanke had disguised himself to escape unseen out of the city. He'd stolen Niehoff's aircraft and was already high above the bombed-out ruins that had once been Breslau. The pilot set a course to the southwest. The view changed to springtime fields. Soon the plane and Hanke would be on the other side of the front – safe with German forces in Czechoslovakia.

### GERMAN SOLDIERS AWAITED THE ENEMY LATER THAT DAY

After Karl Hanke's escape, Breslau was ready to surrender. General Niehoff negotiated peace terms.

About 300 German soldiers were crammed into a dingy basement, all fearing enemy reprisals. A paratrooper officer stood up on a chair and began talking.

"Men! Comrades!" He began. "We have done what we could. I thank you for your constant readiness to act in fighting which was often hard... Do what you can reconcile with your honour towards your fallen comrades and your consciences. Germany is lost... and there's no longer a place on this earth for an old Fallschirmjäger captain".

He took his gun from its holster, aimed it at his head and pulled the trigger.

Meanwhile, General Niehoff was at the headquarters of Soviet General Vladimir Gluzdovskii where the German read through the conditions of surrender. The wording was much milder than Niehoff had dared hope: the sick and wounded would get aid, the security of civilians would be guaranteed, and soldiers would be treated according to international law. Relieved, the general signed the surrender. The room went quiet, and then the Soviet



army's commissar, Vassily Klovoy, spoke: "The Soviet 6th Army will move into Breslau around 21.00", he said.

Niehoff immediately protested. He couldn't possibly disarm his troops in just over two hours. Everything would be chaotic. "Marshal Konev has orders from Moscow to announce the occupation of Breslau tonight", the commissar replied icily.

### THE ENEMY SHOWED NO MERCY

#### THE NIGHT OF 8TH MAY, 1945

The war was over. Soviet troops occupied Breslau, while city residents hid indoors.

Over the following weeks, gangs of Soviet soldiers combed through the city in search of alcohol and women. They staggered about with mugs and bottles in their hands while randomly firing their weapons into the air. If drunk enough,

they'd drink everything they came near, even antifreeze. Several fell to the streets where they slept off their excess.

### WITNESSES FROM BRESLAU SURVIVED

#### JUNE, 1945

German prisoners were led out of the city in long columns.

Among the captives, Hugo Hartung later moved to Munich, where he was a theatre critic and novelist until his death in 1972.

The priest Paul Peikert took office in Bredenborn in West Germany and died in 1949.

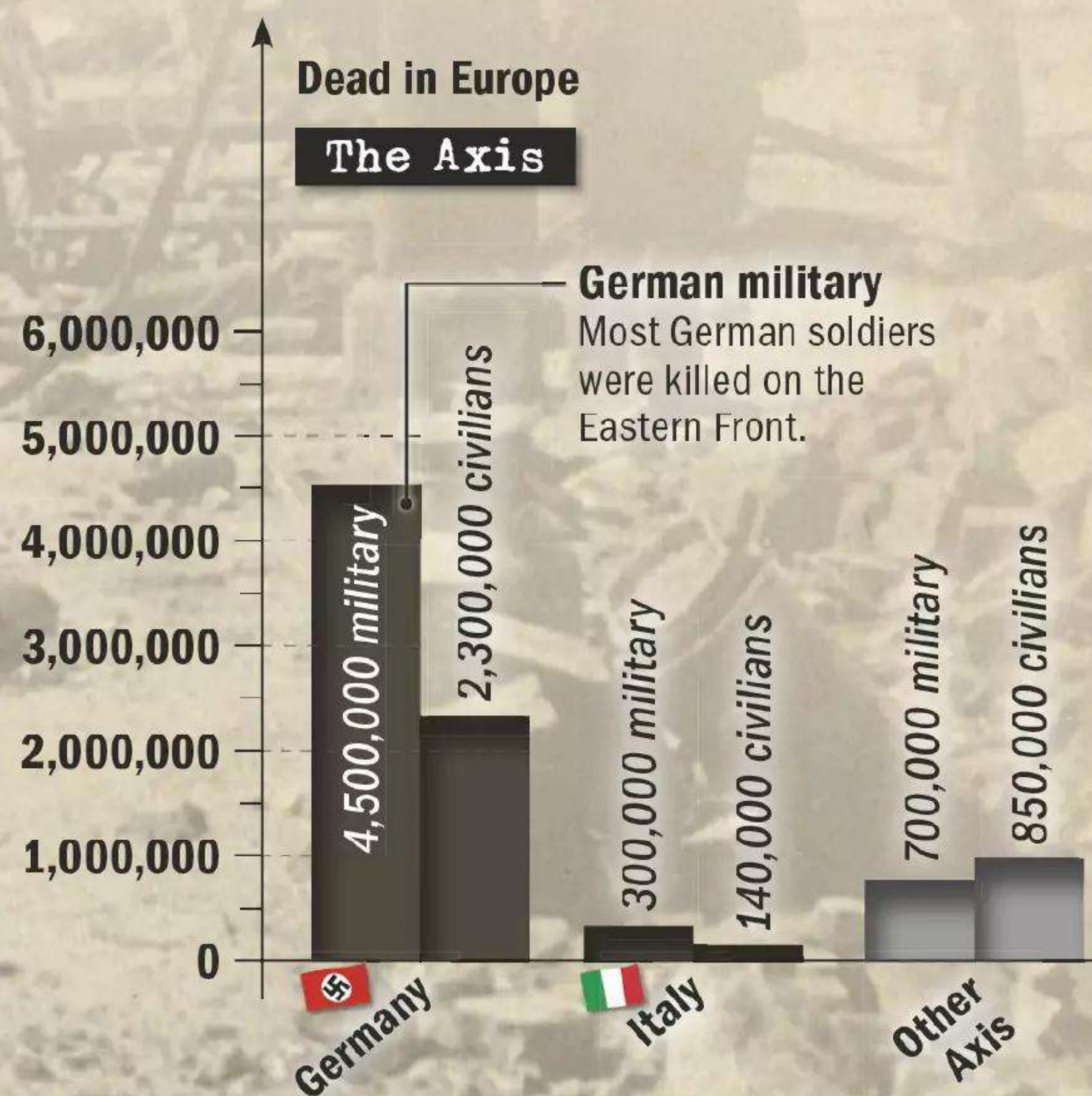
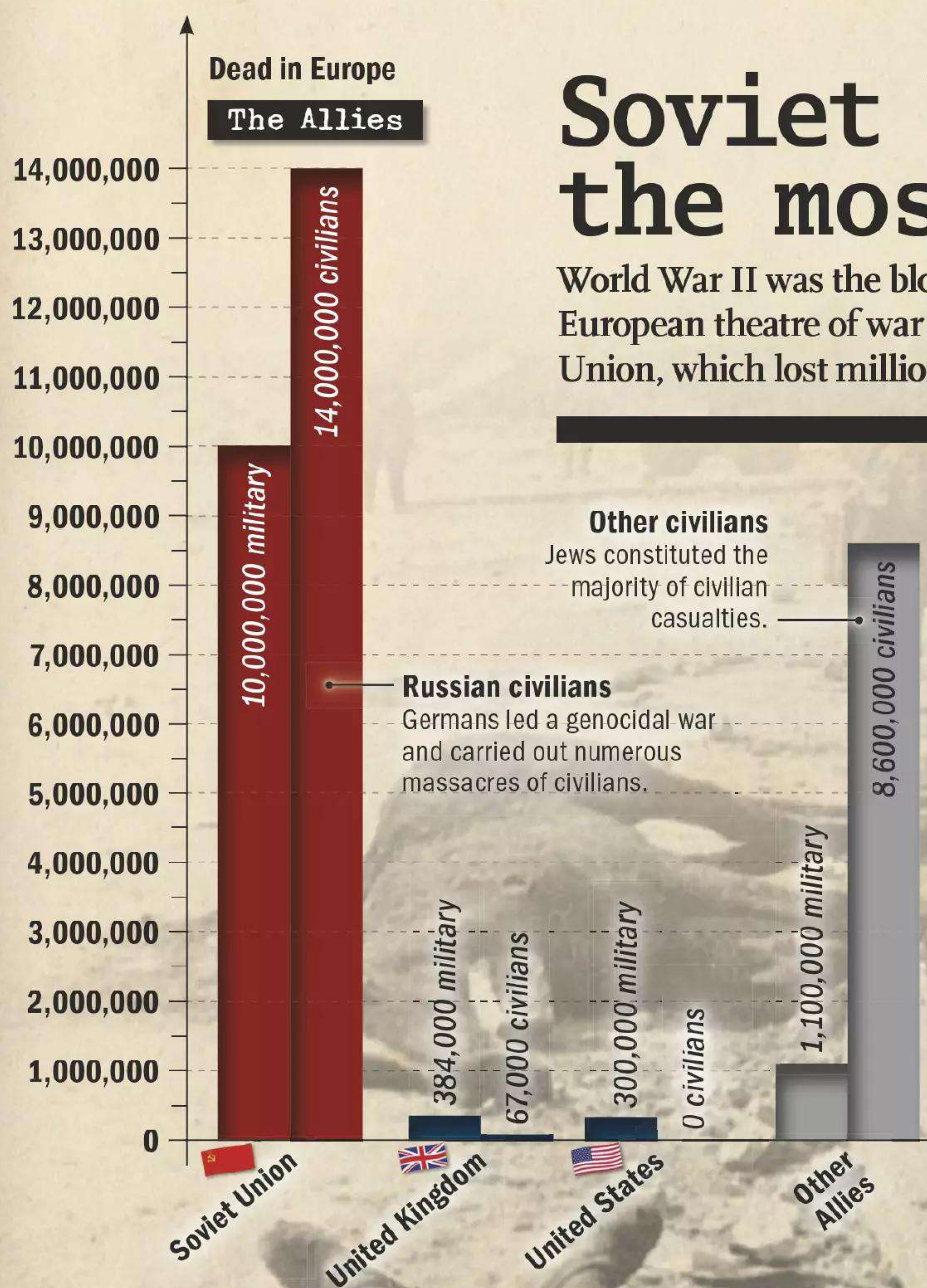
Hitler Youth member Horst Gleiss became a zoologist. In 1975 he founded a memorial archive of the Siege of Breslau.

Hermann Niehoff was held captive in a Soviet prison until 1955. Afterwards he worked for a chemical company and wrote about Breslau. He died in 1980.

## PERSPECTIVE

# Soviet Union suffered the most losses

World War II was the bloodiest conflict in human history, and the European theatre of war had the most victims. Hardest hit was the Soviet Union, which lost millions of soldiers and civilians.



When fleeing, German soldiers were often forced to leave dead comrades where they fell.



## COVER

Ulstein/Ritzau Scanpix, AKG/Ritzau Scanpix, Keystone-France/Getty, Margaret Bourke-White/LIFE/Getty, Ivan Dubasov, photo bucket.com

## WELCOME

P. 3: Ullstein/Polfoto.

## CONTENTS

P. 4-5: Novosti/Scanpix.

## GERMAN TROOPS INVADE POLAND

p. 6-7: Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 8: www.gunstar.co.uk, akc/Scanpix, akc/Scanpix, p. 9: Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 10: All Over Press, Bettman/Corbis/All Over Press, p. 10-11: Universal History Archive/Getty, p. 11: United States National Archives (NARA), Artur Walachowski, Chester Hendrix og Vincent Bourguignon/moderndrawings.jexiste.be, p. 12: Ullstein/Polfoto, www.onesixthwarriors.com, p. 13: Ullstein/Polfoto p. 14-15: Julien Bryan/Wikimedia, www.warrelics.eu, Wikimedia.

## HITLER TRIUMPHS OVER RED ARMY

P. 16-17: BArch Bundesarchiv Bild 169-0084, p. 18: Peter v. Lukacs/Military Antiques AB, p. 18: Jonas Jonsson/www.warrelics.eu, p. 18-19: SV-Bilderdienst/Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 19: © 2014, Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 20: Michael Nicholson/Corbis/All Over, Michael Nicholson/Corbis/All Over Press, p. 20-21: Margaret Bourke-White/LIFE/Getty Images, p. 21: Mark Wade, p. 22: SZ-Photo/Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 22-23: Hulton-Deutsch/Corbis/All Over Press, p. 61: AP/Polfoto, p. 24: © 2014, Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, S. Khoroshko/Slava Katamidze Collection/Getty Images, p. 25: Robert Truscott/www.warrelics.eu, Wikimedia, Ron Volstad/Osprey (illustration), p. 26: Library of Congress, www.warrelics.eu, p. 27: Hulton Archive/Getty Images, p. 28: AP/Polfoto, p. 29: flightglobal.com, Image created by Simon GP Geoghegan, Bettmann/Corbis/All Over Press, © 2014, Photo Scala, Florence/BPK.

## SOVIET DICTATOR TURNS A BLIND EYE

P. 30-31: Bridgeman/Scanpix, p. 32: Getty Images, AKG/Scanpix, p. 33: Mary Evans/Scanpix, AP/Polfoto, p. 34: Sovfoto/Getty Images, p. 35: Bridgeman/Scanpix, historymartinez.files.wordpress.com, www.warheroes.ru, p. 36: www.warrelics.eu, AKG/Scanpix, p. 36-37: Stringer/Hulton Archive/Getty Images, p. 38: Mary Evans/Scanpix, p. 39: flickr.com, Bridgeman/Scanpix.

## GERMAN RING OF STEEL CHOKES LENINGRAD

P. 40-41: Ullstein/SV-Bilderdienst/Polfoto, p. 42: Nick Jeans (Jeeensy)/www.warrelics.eu, p. 42-43: Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 43: spb-tombs-walkeru.narod.ru, p. 44: Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 44-45: Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 45: englishrussia.com, Wikimedia, p. 46: Mary Evans/Polfoto, p. 46-47: Sovfoto/ UIG/Getty Images, p. 48: crystalline.travel, Ullstein/Polfoto, D. Trakhtenberg/Slava Katamidze Collection/Getty Images, p. 49: Bridgeman.

## THE BLITZKRIEG FREEZES

P. 50-51: © 2014, Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 52-53: SZ Photo/Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 54: © 2014, Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 55: Osprey, Osprey, p. 66: Corbis/All Over Press, www.armchairgeneral.com, Laski Diffusion/Getty Images, p. 57: skynet.be, Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

## FIGHTER PILOTS SPREAD DEATH IN THE EAST

P. 58-59: acesflyinghigh.wordpress.com, p. 60-61: www.asisbiz.com, p. 61: Ullstein/Polfoto, Wikimedia, BArch Bundesarchiv Bild 146-1990-021-11A/Wikimedia, p. 62: Scherl/Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Scanpix, www.regencystamps.com, p. 63: germanring.lv, alifraikkhan.blogspot.dk, p. 64: aircraftnut.blogspot.com, www.ecrater.co.uk, p. 65: www.worldwarphotos.info, p. 66: akc-images/Scanpix, Wikimedia, p. 67: www.asisbiz.com, albumwar2.com, www.militaryfactory.com, akc-images/Scanpix.

## CAPTURED BY THE GERMANS

P. 68-69: Wikimedia, p. 70: BArch Bundesarchiv Bild 101-267-0124-20A/Wikimedia, p. 71: Wikimedia, Wikimedia, p.

72-73: BArch Bundesarchiv Bild 146-1992-114-21A, p. 73: BArch Bundesarchiv Bild 146-1979-113-04, Wikimedia, p. 74: BArch Bundesarchiv Bild 183-B21845, George Konig/Getty Images, p. 75: Berliner Verlag/picture-alliance/DPA/AP/Polfoto, photosofwar.net, bag-of-dirt.tumblr.com, bag-of-dirt.tumblr.com.

## ATTACK ON STALINGRAD

P. 76-77: ww2today.com, p. 78: © 2015 Photo Scala, Florence/bpk, p. 79: akc-images/Scanpix, AFP/Ria Novosti/Scanpix, p. 80: BArch Bundesarchiv Bild 101-646-5188-17, AFP/Scanpix, p. 80-81: NTB, Mikkel Juul Jensen (illustration), p. 81: Scanpix, Ria Novosti/Polfoto, p. 82: BArch Bundesarchiv Bild 183-J20509, akc-images/Scanpix, p. 83: Shutterstock, www.warstuff.com, Ron Volstad/Osprey, Ron Volstad/Osprey, Shutterstock, p. 84-85: Zelma/Ria Novosti/AFP/Scanpix, p. 85: Wikimedia, p. 86: Loskutov/Ria Novosti/AFP/Scanpix, p. 87: 4archive.org.

## HITLER'S ARMY LOST IT ALL AT STALINGRAD

P. 88-89: akc/Scanpix, p. 90-91: © Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 91: www.1944shop.com, p. 92: © Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 93: BArch Bundesarchiv Bild Plak 003-009-223, Novosti/NTB Scanpix, p. 94: akc/Scanpix, © Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 95: BArch Bundesarchiv Bild 183-J18808, p. 96: www.sovietmilitarystuff.com, akc/Scanpix, p. 97: Ullstein/Polfoto.

## JEWISH REVOLT WAS CRUSHED

P. 98-99: © Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 100-101: © Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 101: National Archives and Records Administration, Poland/Wikimedia, Kazimierz Moczarski "Rozmowy z katem", Warszawa 1981/Wikimedia, p. 102: Ringelblum Archive/www.sanfranciscosentinel.com, © Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 103: © Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 104: photographer unknown, Wikimedia, p. 105: Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 106: www.usmmm.gov/Wikimedia, © Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, © Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, p. 107: akc/Scanpix, Wikimedia, akc/Scanpix.

## HISTORY'S BIGGEST-EVER TANK BATTLE

P. 108-109: Topfoto/Polfoto, p. 110: www.wehrmacht-awards.com, p. 111: Ria Novosti/Topfoto/Polfoto, p. 112: Tass/UIG/Bridgeman, p. 112-113: Tass/UIG/Bridgeman, Mikkel Juul Jensen (illustration), Scherl/Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Scanpix, p. 114: ebay.com, p. 114-115: Tass/UIG/Bridgeman, p. 115: US War Documentary Service/Wikimedia, Wikimedia, p. 116: imgkid.com/ww2-german-tiger-tanks.shtml, Osprey, p. 116-117: www.smcars.net, p. 117: www.icollector.com, Osprey, forums.gamesquad.com, p. 118: akc/Scanpix, p. 119: www.asisbiz.com, forums.gamesquad.com, incredibleimages4u.blogspot.com.

## STALIN FORCED GERMAN RETREAT FROM KIEV

P. 120-121: news2.ru, p. 122: www.1945-2010.info, p. 123: BArch Bundesarchiv Bild 183-H01758/Wikimedia, Wikimedia, www.collectrussia.com, p. 124: Wikimedia, p. 124-125: Sovfoto/UIG/Getty Images, p. 126: thirdeichcolorpictures.blogspot.dk, www.warhistoryonline.com, www.freerepublic.com, p. 126-127: historyimages.blogspot.com, p. 127: www.war-relics.com, Sovfoto/UIG/Getty Images, p. 128: www.collectrussia.com, Topfoto/Polfoto, p. 129: historyimages.blogspot.com.

## STALIN LIBERATED LENINGRAD

P. 130-131: Ria Novosti/Polfoto, p. 132: Sovfoto/UIG via Getty Images, p. 133: ftr.wot-news.com, p. 134: Wikimedia, produto.mercadolivre.com.br, althistory.wikia.com, p. 135: www.wehrmacht-awards.com, operator-as-fuck.tumblr.com/www.ww2incolor.com, p. 136: akc/Scanpix, akc/Scanpix, p. 137: Sovfoto/UIG via Getty Images.

## GERMANS SENT PACKING BY RED ARMY BLITZKRIEG

P. 138-139: Valery Sukhodolskiy/Ria Novosti/Polfoto, p. 140: www.sportsmansguide.com, p. 140-141: Alexander Kapustyanskiy/Ria Novosti/Polfoto, p. 142: galleryhip.com, Boris/Ria Novosti/Polfoto, p. 143: Nikolay/Ria Novosti/Polfoto, Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Scanpix, Ryumkin/Ria Novosti/Polfoto, p. 144: Sovfoto/UIG/Getty Images, p. 145: www.sportsmansguide.com, p. 146: Sovfoto/UIG/Getty Images, medium.com, p. 147: www.wehrmacht-awards.com, Sovfoto/UIG/Getty Images.

## THE RED ARMY STRIKES A DECISIVE BLOW

P. 148-149: AP/Polfoto, p. 150-151: akc/Scanpix,

p. 151: John Massey Stewart Russian Collection/Mary Evans/Scanpix, Ullstein/Getty Images, p. 152: Shutterstock, p. 152-153: Vladimir Grebnev/Ria Novosti/Polfoto, p. 153: Robin Morley/www.warrelics.eu, Alexander Kapustyanskiy/Ria Novosti/Polfoto, p. 154: Ron Volstad/Osprey, Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 155: akc/Scanpix, Scherl/Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Scanpix, p. 156: ww2today.com, p. 157: akc/Scanpix.

## FIREBOMBING LEAVES DRESDEN IN RUINS

P. 158-159: AFP Photo/Slub Dresden Fotothek/Walter Hahn/Scanpix, p. 160: www.etsy.com, Popperfoto/Getty Images, p. 161: CH 12289/P. A. Flt. Lt/Royal Air Force official photographer/IWM/Wikimedia, p. 162-163: William Dady/Clavework Graphics/www.clavework-graphics.co.uk, William Dady/Clavework Graphics/www.clavework-graphics.co.uk, William Dady/Clavework Graphics/www.clavework-graphics.co.uk, p. 163: Kerry oster/ 75nzsquadron.com, CH 17362/Forward (F/O) Royal Air Force official photographer/IWM/Wikimedia, p. 164: CL 1404/F/O L. Howard, no. 1 RAFFPU/IWM/Wikimedia, p. 164-165: Mikkel Juul Jensen (illustration), p. 165: Mikkel Juul Jensen (illustration), Official Photo/TRE photographer/via Defford Airfield Heritage Group, Downies Coins Pty Ltd, Melbourne, Australia, p. 166: Fred Ramage/Keystone Features/Hulton Archive/Getty Images, BArch Bundesarchiv Plak 100033-037, p. 167: Mondadori Portfolio via Getty Images.

## DOOMED CITY DEFIES STALIN

P. 168-169: SZ Photo/Bridgeman (billeter fra Berlin 1945), p. 170: akc/Scanpix, p. 171: www.usmbooks.com, akc/Scanpix, p. 172: Ullstein/Polfoto (billeter fra Berlin april 1945), p. 172-173: akc/Scanpix, p. 173: Ullstein/Polfoto, p. 174: www.zib-militaria.de, Gregory Proch (illustration), Gregory Proch (illustration), p. 175: Dmitri Baltermants/oscarenfotos.com, © 2015 Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, akc/Scanpix, p. 176: www.fotopolska.eu, p. 177: historyimages.blogspot.dk.



# SLAUGHTER AT THE EASTERN FRONT

**Publishing Director:** Niels Jespersen  
**Editor-in-chief:** Hanne-Luise Danielsen  
**Cover design:** Sidse Lange  
**Production:** Eva L. Strandmose  
**Translators:** Nick Peers, Karen Levell,  
Katharine Davies, Toni Baxter

**Bringing History to Life is published by:**  
Bonnier Publications International AS,  
PB 543, 1411 Kolbotn, Norway.

**Printed by:** Poligrafijas Grupa Mukusala, Ltd.

**ISSN:** 2535-8189

**Marketing/Distribution UK and Export:**  
Marketforce (UK), 3rd Floor, 161 Marsh Wall,  
Canary Wharf, London E14 9AP  
Tel: +44 (0) 20 3787 9001  
[www.marketforce.co.uk](http://www.marketforce.co.uk)

**Licensing and Syndication:**  
Regina Erak – [regina.erak@globalworks.co.uk](mailto:regina.erak@globalworks.co.uk)  
Tel: +44 (0)7753 811622

All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner or form is strictly prohibited without the prior written consent of the publisher. Whilst every care is taken with the material submitted to this bookazine, no responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage. Whilst every effort has been

made to contact all copyright holders, the sources of some pictures that may be used are varied and, in many cases, obscure.

The publisher is happy to make good in future editions any error or omissions brought to their attention. The publication of any quotes or illustrations for which authorisation has not been given is unintentional.



**BONNIER**  
Publications International

Printed matter  
3041 0876



# SLAUGHTER AT THE EASTERN FRONT

In June 1941, Hitler launched a massive surprise attack on the Soviet Union. 3.7 million German soldiers stormed over the border in an incredible display of Nazi blitzkrieg. But Stalin's enormous empire turned out to be too a hard nut to crack, even for Hitler's elite Wehrmacht. Soon millions of troops found themselves locked into a bloody onslaught along history's longest-ever front line.

